

Restaurant to Another World



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4
NOVEL

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

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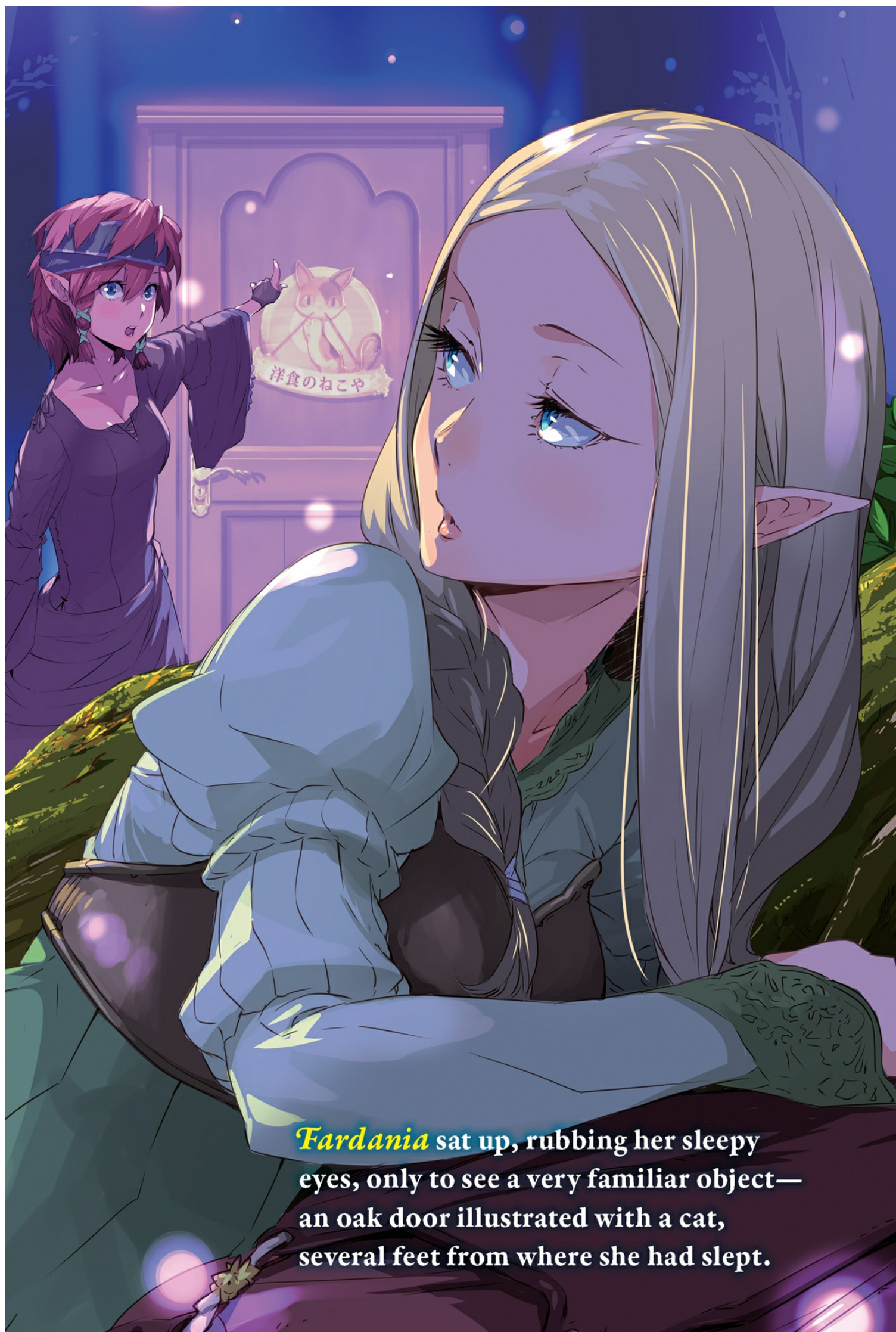
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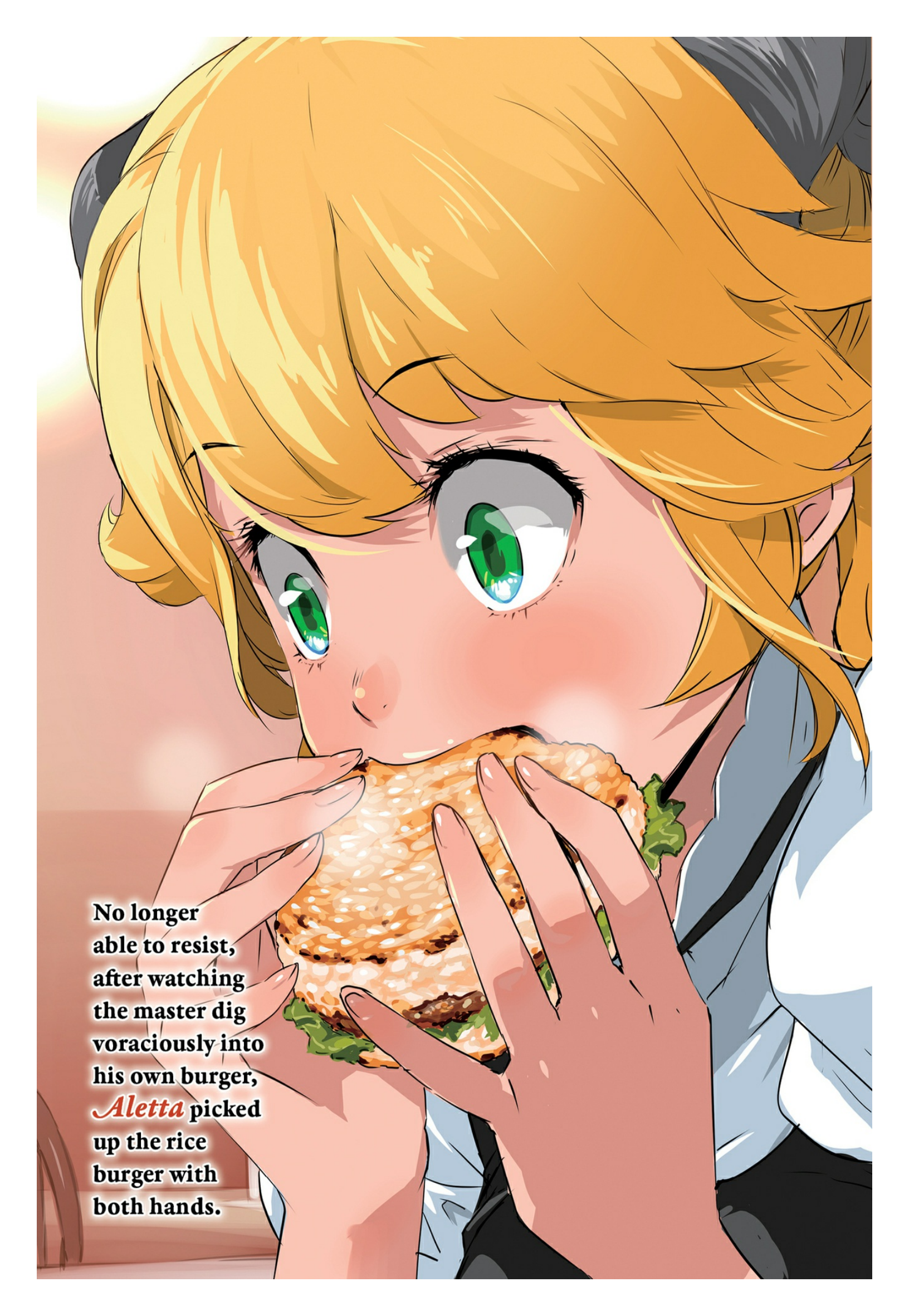


Fardania sat up, rubbing her sleepy eyes, only to see a very familiar object—an oak door illustrated with a cat, several feet from where she had slept.

A manga-style illustration of a young woman with short, wavy blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She is wearing a dark green, short-sleeved dress with a high collar. She is looking up at a large, round bowl of light-colored ice cream with a mint leaf and small red toppings. She has a surprised expression on her face. In the background, there is a white plate with a silver fork. The scene is set in a warm, orange-toned environment.

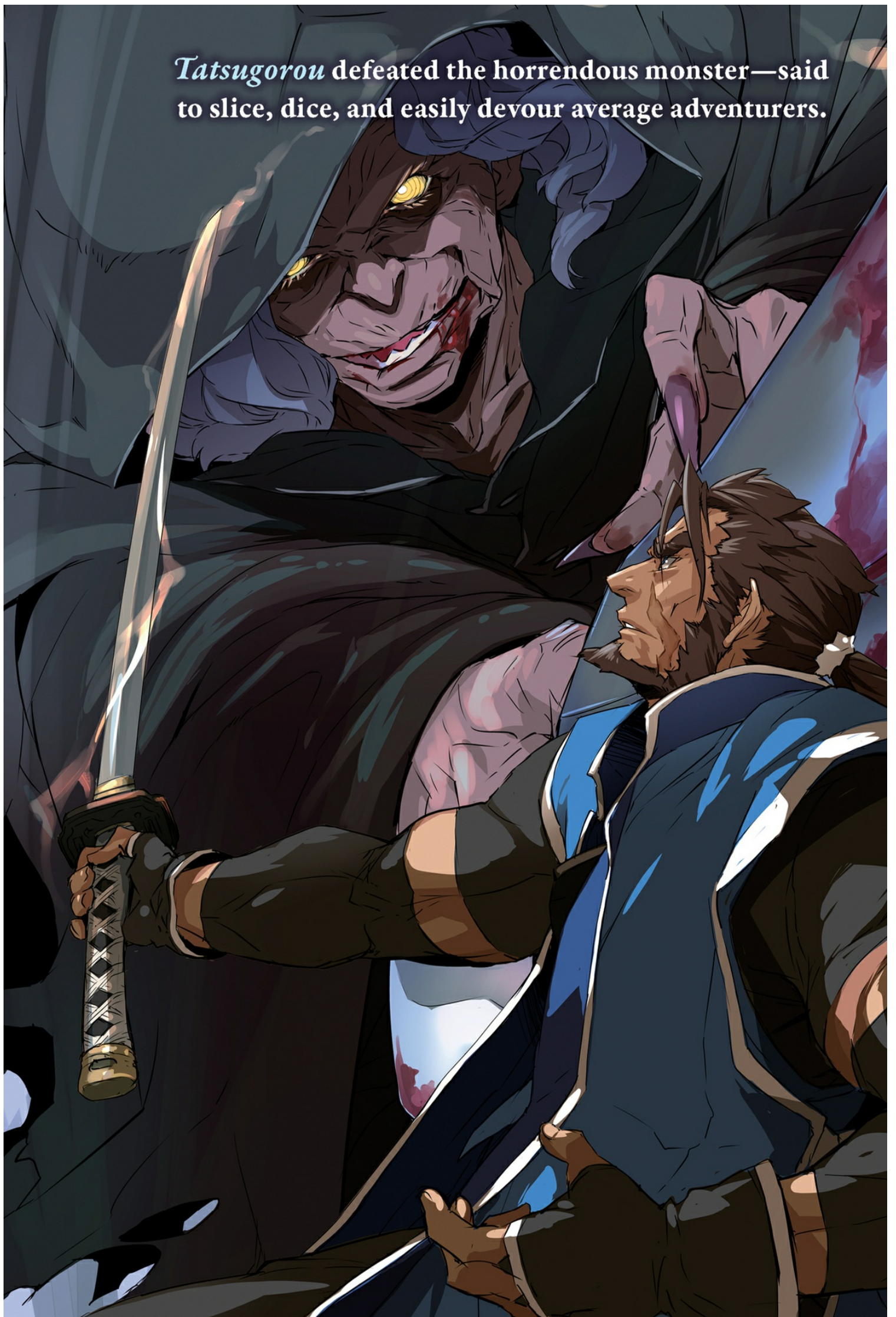
Faced with the round
ice cream sitting before
her, *Celestine* gulped.

My, my.
This is just...



No longer
able to resist,
after watching
the master dig
voraciously into
his own burger,
Aletta picked
up the rice
burger with
both hands.

Tatsugorou defeated the horrendous monster—said to slice, dice, and easily devour average adventurers.



The nostalgic sound of the door opening filled Koyomi's ears. Her eyes scanned the room, until she spotted a young elf girl with pitch-black hair, wearing a black waitress uniform. She carried food back and forth.

**"Welcome to
Western Cuisine
Nekoya!"**

**"Is this your first
time here?"**

A young blonde lady in a Nekoya waitress's uniform spoke to her. Two unmistakable black horns poked out from her head.

**"Right this
way!"**



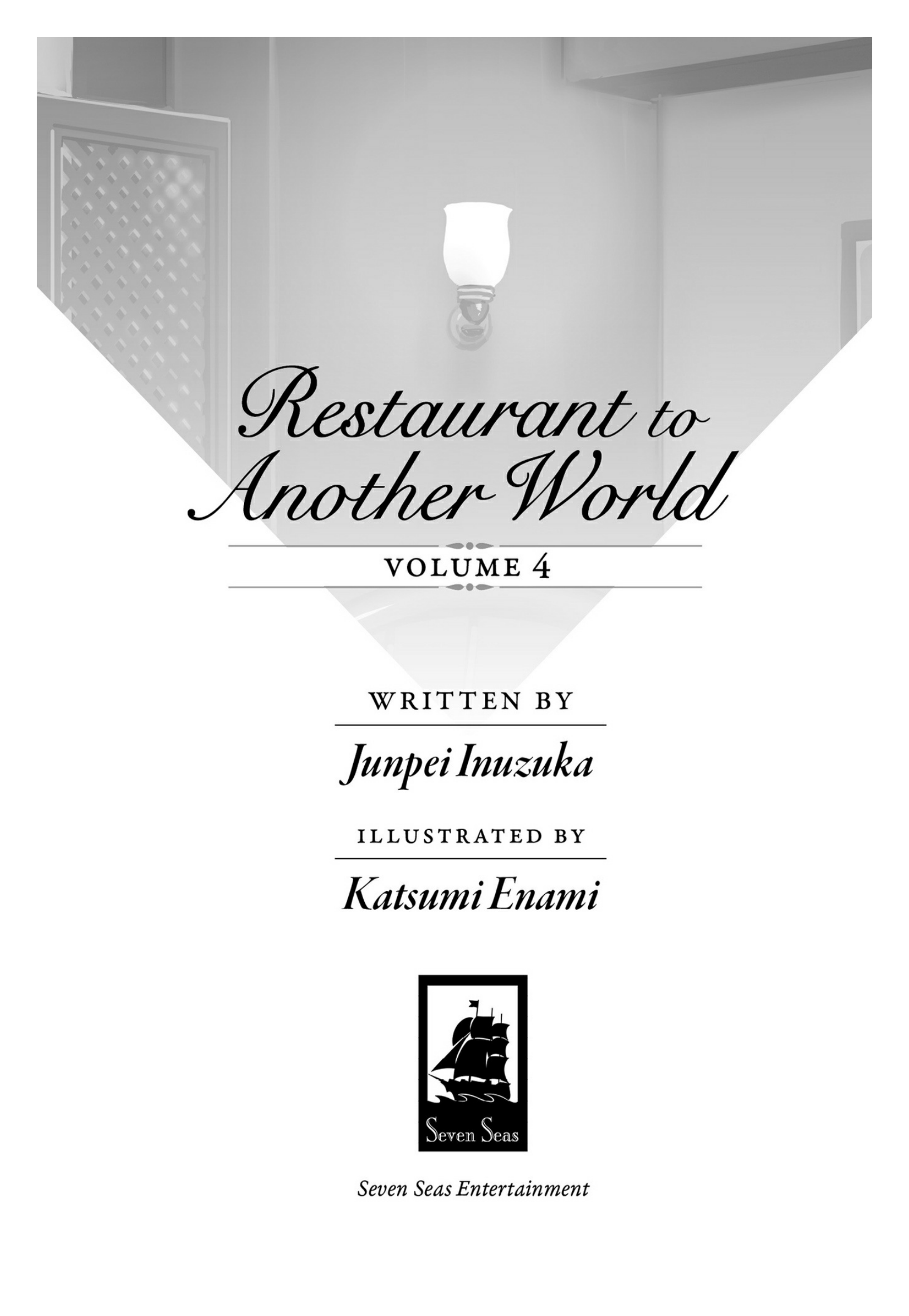
Introduction
RESTAURANT TO ANOTHER WORLD

Every Saturday, a magical door with an illustration of a cat appears in the other world. They call it the *Restaurant to Another World*.

In Volume 4, an old regular visits Nekoya once more. She seeks the memories a certain nostalgic flavor will bring her.

She's shocked by the two young girls carrying orders back and forth—a golden-haired demon girl and a strange girl clad in black.

The old regular feels the passage of time. Why did she visit this restaurant?



Restaurant to Another World

VOLUME 4

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Seven Seas Entertainment

ISEKAI SHOKUDO 4

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Translation rights arranged with Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.
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Information requiring the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

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MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64505-213-5

Printed in Canada

First Printing: July 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Restaurant to Another World

VOLUME 4

Nekoya's Menu

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Prologue:

From Here on Out Rolling face up, Yomi gazed at the endless blue sky.

Only then did she truly feel as though it was all over.

Has the world been destroyed?

Yomi shook with fear, her body pushed to the very brink. She couldn't move a muscle, so she let her thoughts wander.

It felt as though it had worked. Or at least, she thought as much.

She and her friends had managed to corner the powerful demon king. With its back against the wall, however, it had sacrificed its own life to revive that...*thing*. Yomi and her companions recognized the horrific monster as the dark lord—the very deity that the demons worshiped.

Although newly born into the world, the dark lord was far more powerful than any demon king they had bested. It was truly worthy of being called a god.

However, it seemed to lack consciousness. The life force simply ate and ate, as though intent on consuming the world itself.

Yomi had struck the foul beast with the cursed demon blade crafted from a fang of the long-gone Black Overlord, ruler of death and darkness. Only then did she feel one of her attacks finally make it through. She poured every last bit of dark power into the blade. If the attack didn't work, Yomi was certain that the world would be consumed.

There's no point in thinking like that.

Yomi had no way of knowing whether her final strike defeated the dark lord or if the being consumed the world. Evidently surprised by the pain she had inflicted upon it, the dark lord—a creature that lived purely on instinct—moved as far away as possible.

It swatted Yomi like a fly, through the very fabric of space-time, and all the way to another world—ensuring that she would never be able to return home.

Yomi found herself floating in an endless ocean. Wherever she cast her gaze, all she could see was a blue line on the horizon.

She discarded everything that would get in the way of her survival, aside from her Sigil and clothes. For seven days and nights, she swam with the current, eventually arriving at a beach of sorts.

Now that Yomi had avoided death, she thought about her companions.

I just hope those three survived, if nothing else.

There was Alto, whose knowledge and magical abilities surpassed Yomi's own. Then there was Alex, who boasted of his superior swordsmanship and filthy lifestyle. Last but not least, there was Leo, whose blessings from the Lord of Light exceeded those Yomi had received from the Goddess of Darkness.

Yomi was an irregular. She had been "created" with ogre seed. (The ogre was said to have been the strongest one sighted since the Mountain Nation's borders had opened.) That seed was bestowed upon a maiden of the Shrine of Darkness, who had been born with an incredibly strong blessing of darkness despite her weak body. Upon Yomi's birth, the shrine maiden had passed away.

As far as Yomi was concerned, the world meant nothing to her, aside from the three comrades with whom she had traveled and defeated countless demon kings.

The most important thing is figuring out my next move.

Switching gears, Yomi thought about her situation. The Shrine of Darkness had created her with the specific purpose of slaying demon kings, but now that mission was over.

She was certain that nobody would complain about her efforts. She had only failed against one king and had managed to battle the very deity the demons worshiped.

In other words, the warrior no longer had a reason to live. The future that stretched out in front of Yomi was as empty as the sky she gazed upon.

Perhaps I should just wait for the end to take me. Hmm...?

A shadow fell over her, making her blink. A man's face appeared before her

eyes.

Huh. So, I suppose there are humans here, too.

The tanned man looking down at her had a short haircut and a slightly sad expression. He was close to her age, judging by his appearance. His thin face resembled those of the Mountain Nation's inhabitants, whom Yomi hadn't seen since crossing over from the Western Continent so many moons ago. The man began to speak to her in an unfamiliar, otherworldly tongue.

Next to him was some kind of wooden bucket full of stone-like objects.

Yomi could tell that the man had no murderous or evil intent, so he most likely wasn't some kidnapper or thief. She realized that he was probably just worried about her, since she was lying basically naked on the sand. Yomi relaxed, staring up at the man blankly.



He opened his mouth and said something. Yomi knew both the Eastern and Western Continents' languages, so the fact that she couldn't understand his words reminded her that she really was in another world.

I haven't the slightest idea what he's saying. Oh well.

Yomi focused her energies and began casting a spell.

She used a special technique Alto had created during their travels. It permitted the caster to connect their consciousness directly to someone in front of them for communication.

Yomi wouldn't be able to read the man's memories or emotions, but she would see his intentions. The spell allowed its user to express themselves to creatures that couldn't speak and understand what they wanted to say. It was quite useful while negotiating or when asking for guidance or watering hole locations.

"Yer gonna catch a cold lying out here like this, young lady. Crap... You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you? Chinese and English don't work... Damn. I don't know German."

As she read his intent, Yomi could interpret what he said. The man in front of her was apparently speaking not only his otherworldly native tongue but also those of other regions.

"It's...okay. Can understand...words."

Passing her own intentions to the man's mind, Yomi spoke in the Eastern Continent's dialect, which caused him to interpret her words as his own country's language.

"Oh, you speak Japanese after all!" His eyes shone as he whispered to himself. "Thank goodness. Seriously."

He let out a sigh of apparent relief.

"In any case, you really oughta be more careful," he continued. "You could catch a cold! And, I mean, look... The war's over, right? You're mighty beautiful, so I'm sure you got things to look forward to! Oh... I know! How about grabbing a bite? My place is a western diner in Dalian. Before the war, I worked as a

western chef in Shanghai after I got into a fight with my old man and left home. Just yesterday, I went pretty far out to find ingredients! Got my hands on some real good pork. So, how 'bout it? It's on me. You know what they say—treasure each and every meeting, right?”

As he strung together a seemingly endless number of words, something about his smile seemed almost...rushed.

Yomi's stomach growled in response.

“Food, huh...?”

Yomi had gone seven days without consuming anything but salt water. Her stomach was empty.

“I'm afraid I'll have to take you up on your most generous offer.”

Now that she thought about it, her purse had sunk to the ocean floor, leaving her with no money. She wasn't fond of killing people just to feed herself, so she decided it was best to accept the man's kind offer. For now, she'd focus on surviving and getting something to eat.

Yomi stood up, and time slowly began to flow once more. Wrapping herself in the overcoat the man handed her, she started walking.

“Oh, that's right. I completely forgot to introduce myself. I'm Yamagata Daiki. My family name is written with the kanji for 'mountain' and 'direction.' My given name's written with the characters for 'large tree,' from that saying about seeking shelter in the shadow of a large tree. My dad named me that way because he wanted me to become a tall, reliable man.”

“I see. Well, my name is Yomi. I'm sorry to cause you so much trouble.”

As she exchanged words with Daiki, Yomi's feet dug into the ground of the other world.

Why is he being so kind to me?

Daiki didn't know her true nature. Still, it was hard for Yomi to comprehend why he was being so kind to a woman once feared as the “Demon King Slayer.”

Years later, at a government office, Yomi learned that Daiki had thought she'd lost a lover or family member in the war, as he had. He'd feared that she was

about to throw herself into the ocean and was desperate to stop her. Daiki explained this after Yomi told him that she had been born on the Western Continent and that her parents were long gone, leaving her alone in the world.

Afterward, she changed her name to Yamagata Koyomi.

Chapter 61:

Almond Chocolates It was the second week of February.

A customer arrived at Nekoya early, before Aletta and Kuro had even come in to work.

“Yo! I’m counting on you this year, too,” said the master’s childhood friend. He was a pâtissier at the Flying Puppy, the cake shop above Nekoya. He’d brought plenty of beautifully wrapped, unsold confections. “I made a little extra.”

“Much obliged,” said the master, taking the sweets from his old friend.

When it came to sales, Valentine’s Day was one of the most important times of year for Japan’s pâtissiers. The holiday obviously meant a great deal at the Flying Puppy, too.

Leading up to Valentine’s Day, the master’s old friend made all kinds of chocolate goods. Three days before the holiday, he opened a special baking classroom for hopeful girls (and even some boys).

Then, the pâtissier advertised and sold tons of chocolate. Valentine’s Day was second only to Christmas for huge, multi-day sales.

Of course, to avoid selling out completely, the Flying Puppy made enough stock to guarantee leftovers every single year.

To sell those leftovers, the master’s childhood friend dropped by Nekoya on Saturdays during the Valentine’s season, when the restaurant was in the midst of its Valentine’s Fair.

Every year, the pâtissier’s childhood friend bought the inevitable leftover Valentine’s Day treats. This helped the pâtissier avoid filling his shelves with confections he couldn’t sell once the holiday passed, so it was a win-win for the Flying Puppy.

“It’s all good,” the pâtissier said, smiling. “We don’t do the half-off thing when

it comes to leftovers, so if you're willing to buy these at the regular price, I've got no complaints."

"Folks look forward to this stuff every year. I can't let them down, you know?" the master replied with a grin.

The master first decided to try selling sweets at Nekoya when his childhood friend approached him with the request. Now, however, the folks on the other side seemed to think that Valentine's Day was some special festival with unique confections they couldn't get their hands on in their world. Thus, multiple regulars looked forward to this time of year.

The master never went out of his way to explain what Valentine's Day was about, which meant that he couldn't afford to stop selling sweets. Nekoya ended up having its fair share of limited-time, season-exclusive items.

The master was hanging a "Valentine's Fair Today!" sign in Japanese in the corner of the room when he realized something.

Oh, that's right.

He stopped working and walked into the kitchen, pulling the item he'd remembered from a pile of blue boxes illustrated with winged dogs. The master placed the item beside the pile.

"He requested it, after all," he whispered sadly. "I hope he comes this year."

The master's old regular placed this particular item on hold every single year, but it had been ages since the master had actually seen him.

Having taken over the restaurant about a decade ago, the master knew full well what the old regular's absence meant. Still, he continued putting the item on hold.

Junior climbed the mountain quietly beneath the blue, cloudless sky, his head aching.

It's so cold.

Although it was the middle of summer, the weather was so frigid that Junior needed to bundle up. He was climbing the region's tallest mountain, headed for

its peak.

“C’mon, get to it! Just a little bit more! You can do it, Master!”

Next to him, Junior’s brown-skinned disciple, Mariabell, shouldered his bags and offered encouragement. In contrast to his exhaustion, she showed no sign of slowing down.

As a veteran treasure hunter, Junior was fairly confident in his stamina. However, he stood no chance compared to Mariabell. She was a resident of this continent that worshiped the Lord of Red and had received their blessing of flame.

Dammit. Why’s it gotta be this mountaintop, of all places?

Growing jealous of his disciple, Junior quickly reminded himself that there was no point in envy. Ruins containing anything of value were always found in places that were easy to protect. After hearing about a location’s buried cache, treasure hunters like Junior couldn’t help wanting to check things out.

Junior’s real name was William Gold.

It wasn’t happenstance that he had the same name as the legendary treasure hunter who’d once traveled the entire world. Junior inherited the name from his great-grandfather.

Junior’s parents might have wanted him to join the Gold Firm, but Junior opted to follow in his great-grandfather’s footsteps. He believed he had a talent for treasure hunting and a real chance at doing well.

After the first William Gold retired, due to inevitable old age, he gathered information on ruins around the world.

Junior felt responsible for searching those ruins.

One ruin contained a magical device specifically crafted by elves to invade the Southern Continent, where the “overlords” were worshiped as gods. The contraption had sent Junior to the southernmost land instantaneously. For some reason, however, it never worked a second time. Perhaps it was broken, or perhaps it had finally used all its remaining power. Either way, Junior had

miscalculated gravely and was stranded.

For ten years, he had found himself traveling the Southern Continent as a treasure hunter, desperately trying to learn the tongue as quickly as possible.

Since he was a treasure hunter, and there was treasure to be found, Junior was climbing a taller mountain than he'd ever attempted.

"We're here!" said Mariabell. "According to Pop's journal, the 'door' should be... Whoa! It's seriously here? For real?!"

She raised her voice, stunned, as she stepped onto the peak a few moments before Junior. The sun was beginning to fall in the west.

"Hmm. So, this is the door, eh? Looks like your father's story was the real deal," Junior replied.

The abnormal sight before Junior stunned him as well.

At the center of a snow-covered series of stones on the mountaintop stood a door, clearly out of place.

"I thought it all sounded pretty fishy. But I guess he was telling the truth. Nekoya's Door really does exist," Mariabell said.

Mariabell's father, a skilled warrior and priest, had devoted his life to the Lord of Red. Three years ago, in a great battle between followers of the Lord of Red and the Lord of White, he'd lost his life to a powerful priest from the other side. However, he'd left his journal behind.

The journal claimed that, once every seven days, a mysterious door leading to a restaurant from another world would appear at the mountain's peak.

The journal also spoke of an annual festival, during which one could obtain special confections made from kalao beans.

"Shall we?"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

After staring at the door for a while, Junior turned the handle.

The door opened to the sound of bells ringing, and the pair made their way

into the other world.

Nekoya's assortment of surprises stretched out before Junior and Mariabell.

"Wowie! So, this is the world of Nekoya, huh?"

Mariabell glanced around the interior, breathing in rich, otherworldly air, altogether different from the mountaintop's.

Just as her father had written in the journal, Nekoya was brightly lit, although there wasn't a single window in the room. The Lord of Red's powers flowed freely here, and all sorts of customers were enjoying their meals.

"Hmmm. There sure are lots of white-skinned folks like you here, Master." Mariabell had learned that strong observational skills were necessary in treasure hunting.

Numerous humans filled the restaurant. However, they weren't brown-skinned, like Mariabell was used to. Most were white like her master.

Hmm? Master?

Mariabell noticed her master staring at a single point, unmoving. She followed his line of sight and spotted a young lady.

The woman was approximately the same age as Mariabell, her white skin somewhat sunburned. She appeared to be enjoying some kind of meat dish—a brown something-or-other covered in black sauce.

The girl stared back at William, also frozen.

"What's wrong? Love at first sight?"

Mariabell attempted to joke with her master, but he gave no response. It soon became clear why.

"Sarah...? N-no, it can't be. But... Sarah, is it really you?!" Junior cried.

Before him sat his cousin, the very woman who should've been living in the capital as the proprietress of the family business.

The last time Junior had seen her was some ten years ago, back when he was still an active treasure hunter on the Eastern Continent—primarily around the

capital. Yet somehow, his senses told him that this was her.

The Sarah that Junior had known was but a child. However, the woman in front of him showed traces of that same little girl. More importantly, she was dressed not as the young lady of a noble family but in a treasure hunter's practical clothes.

“Junior?!”

As chance would have it, Junior's guess was right on the mark. The young lady—Sarah—called to him, seemingly as confused as he was. She remembered Junior as being much younger, but she would never mistake him for someone else.

Standing before Sarah was the cousin she thought had perished ten years ago.

A little while later, Sarah, Junior, and Mariabell sat together at a table, their meals finished.

“I see,” said Sarah. “So, if you're on the Southern Continent, you must be far past the Dragon God Sea, right?”

Junior's tale surprised Sarah, but it also helped her put together the pieces of a greater puzzle.

Brown-skinned customers and monsters were common at the Restaurant to Another World. If they'd been from the Western Continent's Sand Nation, it would have been easy to recognize them by their attire. Moreover, they wouldn't have been accompanied by monsters.

Sarah had put a lot of thought into figuring out who the mysterious brown-skinned visitors—often accompanied by monsters—were. However, she never arrived at a proper answer.

“Exactly. Over there, up north, is what they call the Sea of the Blue Lord. I'm pretty sure we know it as the Dragon God Sea,” Junior explained.

He pulled out his worn journal and told Sarah everything he knew. He described how he'd found himself lost underneath a night sky filled with stars he couldn't read. How he'd struggled with not knowing the land's language.

How surprised he was to find that monsters were intelligent, just like humans—building their own towns, developing their own cultures and lives.

He told Sarah that he couldn't believe his eyes when he saw goblins bring crops they'd raised to the marketplace to sell to ogres.

At first, Junior asked Sarah how his family was doing and about the current state of the capital. However, the pair soon shifted into a passionate discussion about ruins and the Southern Continent.

"Elf ruins, eh? Are others still active?"

"No clue. I've yet to find any active ones on the Southern Continent."

Sarah couldn't have been more curious. Dragons worshiped as deities, intelligent monsters living beside humans—to her, it was a completely unknown land.

If she'd gotten through Junior's story without feeling anything, she would have been incapable of calling herself a treasure hunter.

An idea struck Junior. "Oh, I know! Think you could hold on to this journal for me?"

"Are you sure?!"

Treasure hunters considered their journals, in which they collected information, as important as life itself. Veteran hunters' journals could sell for dozens of gold coins. Sarah couldn't help questioning her cousin's suggestion.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Details on the ruins the old man researched, and stuff I haven't even gotten around to yet, are written in here. Some places this journal describes might still have untouched treasure, but I'll never be able to look into them all. And maybe if Mom and Dad see this, they'll feel a little at ease."

"I get it."

Junior's explanation made sense to Sarah. He'd gone missing ten years ago and had long been thought dead. If she was going to convince his family that he was still alive, she'd need considerable proof.

A journal of entries penned by Junior in fresh ink was the best option available.

“All right. In that case, I’ll take this. Oh, by the way...”

When the conversation reached its natural end point, Sarah turned her attention to the girl chowing down on her second order of minced meat cutlet.

“Is she your special someone?”

Both Mariabell and Junior answered Sarah’s question quickly.

“Nompe, mmm!”

“No, no. She’s my disciple. That said, I do have a child of my own! This one’s older sister is my wife, actually.”

“Huh. Wow.” Regaining her composure, Sarah realized something.

“By the way, Junior, did you come here with some purpose in mind? It doesn’t seem like you ended up here by accident.”

Judging by Junior’s tough leather armor and cold-resistant equipment—not to mention the sword hanging from his waist—he was in the middle of exploring someplace rough. The door he’d found was obviously in a more trying location than the one Sarah often used.

It didn’t seem to Sarah that Junior was just in Nekoya for a meal.

“Oh, I almost forgot.”

Junior called the demon waitress so he could order—the very reason he’d gone through the trouble of climbing an entire mountain.

“Excuse me, could I place an order?”

“Okaaay!”

Junior watched the demon waitress nod exuberantly.

“I heard that you guys are in the middle of a Valentine’s Fair. Is that true?”

“Absolutely! Will you be ordering chocolate?”

“Yes, actually. Um, do you have almond chocolates? I’d like a box of those to go. I’ll have a box to eat here as well, please.”

“Oh! Oh! Could we also get enough warm milk for the three of us? Almond chocolates and milk are the way to go, lemme tell ya!”

This wasn’t just Mariabell’s favorite combination of foods; it was also a sweet memory. She’d shared almond chocolates and milk with her father.

Later, a middle-aged man—likely the restaurant’s master—came out with a deep dish full of the sweets.

“Sorry about the wait. Here are your almond chocolates.”

He placed the plate in the middle of the table.

“Wow. Shia would lose her mind if she saw this,” Sarah remarked.

Sweets blanketed in colorful sugar filled the plate. They weren’t as brilliant as jewels, but they shone beautifully under the restaurant’s lights nonetheless.

“C’mon, Master! Eat up! If you don’t, I won’t get to have any!”

Junior chuckled at his disciple, who was clearly desperate to start eating. “My apologies. Let’s start with one, shall we?”

Junior reached out for a beautifully round, pebble-like chocolate. He popped it into his mouth.

Huh...? It just tastes like regular sugar.

The almond chocolate’s flavor wasn’t bad, but it certainly wasn’t worth climbing a mountain.

Well, I suppose these things happen... What the...?!

Junior’s disappointment vanished the moment he bit into the chocolate. The heat of his mouth melted it, and a second flavor spread across his tongue. It was different from the sugar’s sweetness and had just a dash of bitterness.

“Heh heh! Ya see, the surface is pretty much like an eggshell. Kalao bean chocolates melt real easy, so they’re wrapped in shells!”

Mariabell smiled at Junior. His surprised look filled her with nostalgia. It was the exact reaction she’d had when she was a little girl and her father brought home almond chocolates one hot summer day. Her whole family had been

shocked that the bitter, medicinal ingredient could prove so delicious.

“I get it,” said Junior. “This flavor really is surprising.”

He enjoyed the chocolate first and then bit into the large, aromatic nut. Everything clicked.

The older adventurer understood why Mariabell’s father had been enthralled with almond chocolates and why his wife and daughter wanted more of them. The confections were delicious, but of course, unavailable on the Southern Continent—and also in the Kingdom’s capital, where Junior used to live.

“Next, I recommend eating one whole and washing it down with milk! Like this.”

After watching the brother-in-law and master she so respected try the chocolates, Mariabell grabbed one of her own and tossed it into her mouth. The sweet, nostalgic taste of sugar coated her tongue.

The moment she began chewing, she encountered the kalao bean’s bittersweet flavor fused with the almond’s aromatic taste.

The sensation of washing it all down with warm milk was unparalleled.

Junior followed his disciple’s lead and found himself agreeing with her. “You’re right. It tastes even better when you try it all at once.”

The kalao bean and aromatic almond, together with the milk’s rich flavor, were truly exquisite. The combination was so delicious that one couldn’t help but want more.

“Agreed,” said Sarah. “The minced meat cutlet here is amazing no matter how often I eat it, but these are fantastic, too.”

She had accompanied the pair on their flavor excursion and nodded her head in agreement after devouring a few chocolates. All manner of customers came to Nekoya primarily for its sweets, regardless of their race, status, or nation. Shia would undoubtedly love the desserts at the restaurant.

Up until then, Sarah had never really gone for “luxury goods” like confections, but the almond chocolates were so tasty that she decided to rethink that policy.

The three dug into the pile of almond chocolates, clearing the plate.

“I have a suggestion, Master.”

During times like this, Mariabell would glance adorably upward at her brother-in-law, who held the money-filled wallet.

“Wait.” Before Mariabell could even make her suggestion, Junior countered with his own. “If we’re going to do this, we should at least try all sorts of stuff, right?” After all, today was the Valentine’s Fair.

A quick glance around the dining hall revealed other customers eating different chocolates from the ones they’d just enjoyed. Junior couldn’t suppress his curiosity.

After filling their stomachs with various chocolates, Junior and Mariabell exited through the door and once again found themselves underneath the wide blue sky.

“All right, shall we head home?” asked Junior. “She’s probably looking forward to these.”

“Aye, aye, Master!”

The pair began making their way home enthusiastically, goods in hand.

I hope she enjoys them.

Imagining his beloved wife smiling, Junior hurried home with his disciple by his side. The journal he’d handed Sarah would later be copied and circulated throughout the Eastern and Western Continents, leading many to set course for the Southern Continent.

But that’s a story for another time.

Chapter 62:

Rice Burger As soon as the master heard the bells in the other room ring, he stopped working in the kitchen and looked at the clock on the wall. It was 6:30 a.m.—a bit too early for Aletta and Kuro to have arrived.

“Master, are you here?!”

The familiar, somewhat shrill voice calling from the entrance belonged to a young lady who visited Nekoya often. Since she basically appeared at random, however, she wasn’t quite a regular.

Her name was Fardania.

The master remembered her quite well. The first time she visited the restaurant, she’d demanded a meal free of meat, fish, milk, or eggs. She struck the master as a picky eater, which meant making all sorts of modifications to his dishes so that he could feed her properly.

At first glance, Fardania seemed to be around the age of a schoolgirl. However, she was an elf. According to one of the master’s older regulars, elves had extremely long life spans and showed few signs of aging, so it was entirely possible that Fardania was much older than she appeared.

“Aye, I’m coming.”

Either way, Fardania was a customer.

The master made his way to the dining hall, where two people stood at the entrance. He gave his visitors a puzzled look. The long-eared elf with golden hair—complete with a bow hanging over her shoulder—was, of course, Fardania.

The master didn’t recognize the young woman behind her, however. Her clothes were similar to Aletta’s usual garments, and she had slightly unkempt braided brown hair and long ears. Judging by the latter, she was probably also an elf. As far as the master could tell, the girls appeared to be around the same age.

The young lady hid behind Fardania’s back, but since she was slightly taller,

she wasn't very well concealed.

"She's with me," said Fardania. "I'd like to grab a bite. Is now a good time?"

"Um... Well, sure. Yeah. It might take a few minutes. Is that all right?"

Fardania could tell that the master was a bit confused, so she simply nodded.

"No problem," she replied. "Oh, and you can serve anything. Just make sure not to use any meat, fish, eggs, or milk. She can't really eat that stuff."

Once Fardania had given the master the necessary instructions, she turned to her companion.

"Let's go, Alice. Don't worry. This human is a genuinely skilled cook. He even makes meals we elves can enjoy in peace."

"Okay..."

As Fardania took Alice's hand and sat her at one of the tables, the master brought the pair lemon water and warm towels.

"Here you go," he said. "Hang in there. The food'll take a little while, and what I can prepare right now is a bit limited. Will that be all right?"

"Of course." Fardania took the water and towels. "I leave it to you."

"Take your time and relax," the master replied.

After the master left, Fardania wiped her hands with the moist cloth and looked at the "young girl" in front of her. Alice's eyes darted around the restaurant nervously, but with great curiosity.

Fardania had acquired quite the companion. From Alice's magical powers and facial shape, Fardania could tell that she was still a small child.

Crap. I've got no experience looking after kids. It wasn't common for elves to have siblings, so Fardania wasn't sure how to interact with someone Alice's age.

As for how any of this came to be, we must go back in time to the night before.

Alice wandered through the forest fearfully. The growls of all manner of

beasts filled the dark woods.

Why? How? Her mind was spinning in circles.

It had been thirty years since Alice was born and twenty years since she'd learned to speak. She knew her father, mother, and many siblings—as well as the other townsfolk—always said that she was a bit of a dummy. But even she understood what was going on in this situation.

I was abandoned? What do I do? What do I do?!

Alice stared into the dark forest surrounding her. However, the moon and stars were nowhere to be seen, making everything pitch black.

Lacking the instinct to conserve energy, Alice wandered aimlessly. The young girl simply wanted to escape the darkness. She fell time and time again as she bumped through the forest, ears pricked.

Alice had been born in a small half-elf village in a corner of the Duchy. Perhaps because of the region's traditions and long history, it was easier for changelings to grow up there. Thus, the Duchy had more half-elf residents than most countries.

Rejected by society at large, the half-elves had come together and made their own villages, living in poverty. This tended to be more common in the Duchy than any other nation. The half-elves married one another, giving birth to more half-elves, who went on to maintain the village.

Alice had two half-elf parents. However, she was different from the other villagers, and not in a good way.

When she was first born, at least, there seemed to be no problems. If anything, she had stronger magical powers than the average child, but she was still welcomed into the world.

When she turned twenty, even thirty, she still had less than half the knowledge of other children her age. She often repeated the same mistakes over and over again, as foolish as a small child.

She was also clumsy and incapable of doing household chores that kids ten or

twenty years younger could complete. In fact, some seven-and eight-year-old girls were more capable than she was.

It didn't help that she was also a picky eater. She refused to drink milk or eat cheese produced by the village's ever-important cow, instead making a face at the scent of dairy. Even once she was technically of age, and had become an "adult" capable of bearing children, nobody thought of taking her as their wife. She simply lived at home with her parents.

When an epidemic hit the village, Alice's parents were stolen from her, along with about half the village's residents. The very same parents had doted on Alice, saying that no matter how clumsy or dumb she was, she was adorable.

It was then that Alice's remaining siblings finally abandoned her. They simply lacked the time or resources to look after someone who couldn't care for herself, especially when they had to focus on rebuilding the village.

This led Alice's siblings to leave her alone in the forest.

Someone's here!

Largely due to luck, however, Alice's actions bore fruit. Her eyes made out light within the dark forest. The warm orange glow signaled the presence of people—even Alice knew that much.

She hurried forward with a smile, staring at the light in the distance...and tripped and fell to the ground.

That night, Fardania was camping in the middle of the woods. She tossed the mashrooms she'd picked in the forest and the cobbler's tubers she'd bought in town into a pot, boiling them over the campfire. She also added some miso Chris had given her as a secret ingredient. Boom—soup.

"Hmm." She took a sip. "This seems about right."

Satisfied by the flavor, Fardania put out the flames and summoned a small spirit that produced light, illuminating the area.

About a year had passed since Fardania left her home forest. Her path up to that point had accustomed her to life on the road, to some extent.

Now then... Hmm...?

Just as she was about to eat dinner, Fardania's long ears twitched, picking up the sounds of movement.

"Who's there? Come out at once!"

The noises were too loud to have been produced by woodland creatures, so Fardania took an attack stance, calling out.

"Aaaaaah!"

Perhaps surprised by Fardania's fierce yell, a little girl fell from the underbrush and onto her face, her clothes covered in dirt.

Fardania released her stance and tilted her head in confusion. *What's a child doing here?*

"Hey, you!" she said, extending her hand to the girl. "What are you doing, wandering around a place like this at night? It's dangerous for children to be out right now."

"Um...um... Everyone told me to go to the forest today," the girl answered.

She was only a bit taller than Fardania.

I suppose I shouldn't expect a girl her age to explain properly. But I don't remember an elf village in these parts. Hmm...

Fardania kept her eyes on the girl as she considered the situation. Why in the world would a child her age be wandering the forest alone at night?

As far as Fardania knew, there were no elf territories in the area. If there were, she wouldn't be camping in the middle of nowhere.

Elves weren't always friendly when interacting with other races, but they were typically very kind to each other due to their dwindling numbers. This made the situation all the more puzzling. No elf would ever abandon their young in the forest at night.

Which means... Fardania recalled a story she'd once heard in a human town.

"Wait," she said to the girl. "Are you from the half-elf village in this area?"

Fardania had heard that there was one nearby.

“Mm-hmm.” The girl nodded.

“I see. What’s your name?”

“Um...um... I’m Alice!” the girl answered excitedly. Her stomach rumbled.

“Alice, would you like supper?”

Fardania offered some of her fresh soup to the child.

“Yeah!” Alice nodded firmly.

She then took a portion of her hard bread and split it with the young girl as well.

She’d only brought enough for herself, so giving Alice a chunk meant the meal wouldn’t be particularly satisfying. Nevertheless, faced with a hungry child, Fardania couldn’t possibly do nothing.

“Ah! This soup is tasty!”

How terrible... Rage filled Fardania as she watched the innocent girl eat.

It didn’t take much thought to figure out exactly what was going on. Fardania could tell Alice was a changeling.

Changelings tend to be born to two half-elf parents, but I heard they normally end up being human...

Usually, half-elves were parented by one human and one elf. However, two humans or two elves could birth a half-elf changeling.

“Changeling” also had another meaning. When two half-elves had a child, they stood a good chance of ending up with a human or full-elf changeling.

If the child was human, it wasn’t much of a problem. Humans aged faster than half-elves. However, their growth rate—in other words, the time it took them to become adults—was no different.

It took humans only fifteen years to become adults capable of living on their own and giving birth to their own children. This meant they could live in half-elf villages, or even head off to human towns, with little issue.

In comparison, elves aged slowly. For approximately the first century of elves' thousand-year life spans, their minds were essentially those of children, even if their bodies weren't.

She was probably way too much for the half-elf village to handle.

An elf's appearance didn't change much from birth to death, so you had to discern their age from the amount of magical power within them. Fardania guessed that Alice was, at most, thirty years old. In other words, still just a child.

Alice was really nothing but a little kid compared to humans and half-elves the same age. It wouldn't have helped that in the outside world—the human world—thirty years was a considerable amount of time. Fardania had learned that much in her travels.

Humans thought that living a hundred years was an extraordinary feat. Meanwhile, half-elves typically lasted around two hundred years before moving on to the next life. Those who survived to three hundred were fairly unusual. That difference in life spans must have led everyone Alice knew to abandon her.

Fardania peered at Alice, who was now sleeping peacefully, her belly full of hot soup. *I'll chat with her about it tomorrow.*

She placed her blanket atop the small girl with a gentle smile, like that of a mother caring for her daughter.

And so, the next day...

"Hey, wake up! Far, there's something weird here!"

Just after sunrise, Alice woke Fardania from her slumber within the defensive barrier she'd put up to keep away monsters and the undead.

"Nnm... What is it? Wait, wha...?"

Fardania sat up, rubbing her sleepy eyes, only to see a very familiar object: an oak door illustrated with a cat.

This magical object was said to appear in spots with strong magical energies. In this case, one such spot happened to be several feet from where Fardania had slept.

“I guess it makes sense,” Fardania mused. “I noticed that this place’s magical energies were abnormally strong.”

“Hey, hey! What is it?” Alice asked Fardania nervously. She’d never seen anything like the strange door.

“Nothing bad.” The older elf smiled in an attempt to calm Alice. “That door connects to a different world with all sorts of tasty... Hey, wait!”

After listening to only half of Fardania’s explanation, Alice unhesitatingly ran to the door, turning the handle with all the gumption of a child. Fardania followed after her as quickly as possible.

The door opened, surprising Alice with the sound of bells.

The older elf walked past her and entered first.

Perhaps because Fardania was earlier than usual, there wasn’t a soul to be found in the restaurant—no customers or even waitresses. Fardania called to the master worriedly.

“Master, are you here?!”

“Aye! I’m coming.”

As luck would have it, the master was awake. Fardania heard him reply from the kitchen before he came out. He seemed to have been preparing the day’s food.

Thus, the two elves became customers at the Restaurant to Another World.

Just as Fardania finished thinking over the past day’s events, their food arrived.

“I’m real sorry. The fresh rice isn’t quite done cooking, so I made this with cold rice,” the master explained, setting their food in front of them.

“This here is a mixed vegetable tempura rice burger,” he added. “Don’t worry, I didn’t use any eggs.”

Alice sniffed the burger and raised her voice cheerfully. “Wooooow...!”

In front of the girl were foods she’d never seen in her life—a bright yellow

something-or-other sandwiched between two brown things on a pretty white stone plate. The delicious aroma wafting from the meal made her stomach rumble.

“Hey, hey! Can I eat?” Alice asked Fardania.

“It’s probably still hot, so make sure not to burn your tongue, okay?” Fardania said, with a hint of a smile.

“Kay!”

Alice paid careful attention to Fardania’s words and then immediately turned her attention to the food.

Using her hands, which she’d cleaned with the hot cloth while she waited for the meal, Alice lifted the brown object off the plate.

As it got closer to her face, the scent invited Alice to dig in. She could resist no longer.

With little care for table manners, the girl opened her mouth wide and bit into the burger.

It’s so hot! But it’s super tasty!

The flavor bursting in her mouth stunned Alice.

The first things she tasted were the bread-like objects sandwiching the inner ingredients. Their crispy surface allowed their soft, white insides to spread across her mouth.

This hot, bread-like food was filled with a delicious flavor that normal bread just didn’t have. It was sweet but salty. It smelled amazing and tasted delicious. The explosion of flavor that Alice tasted in her first bite was completely new for her—more delectable than anything she’d ever eaten in her short life.

It wasn’t just the bread-like food. The stuff sandwiched in between was also impossibly tasty. So were the thinly cut, bright orange karoot pieces and the root-like filling.

With each bite, the insides proved crunchier than the “bread” on the outside. They were sweet, salty, and a bit spicy. The fillings combined with the flavor of the bread-like stuff to create something positively transcendent.

Alice savored the food.

On the other hand, Fardania couldn't help feeling defeated yet again as she calmly tasted the meal in front of her.

This is exactly the same as his grilled rice balls.

It didn't take her long to identify the bread-like objects sandwiching the ingredients. Though their shape differed—each piece was a flat circle—they were obviously grilled rice balls with soy sauce.

They tasted salty, like soy sauce; savory, like the ocean's scent; and slightly sweet, like sugar. Fardania also caught the taste of alcohol. She was more than aware that the rice balls' slightly burnt flavor and scent were a delight all on their own.

Mixed vegetable tempura, eh? Can't say I'm familiar with that.

From the dish's name, Fardania concluded that the "mixed vegetables" in question were coated in flour batter and fried in oil—a complex process. She recalled seeing a similar cooking method when she'd last visited the Empire.

So he flavors the vegetables, coats them with batter, and fries them. I bet the latter part of the process is what's called "tempura."

Root vegetables were typically good at absorbing flavor, so they were perfect for soup and also tasted great in any kind of rich seasoning. Fardania was well aware of this.

The sweet karoots smelled ever so faintly of earth. On top of that, the soy sauce contained just a dash of sugar. All the flavors, including the fried crust, came together to create a tremendous feeling of satisfaction.

He got me again. Damn... Just one of these won't be enough.

Fardania thought silently as she sipped miso soup. The broth contained fried tofu, a mysterious savory something-or-other that smelled of the ocean, and thinly cut oranie. The latter vegetable, available on the Western Continent, had recently become farmable on the Eastern Continent as well.

All this analysis took place as Fardania ate her food. By the time she'd figured

out how the dish worked, her meal had vanished from the white plate.

I could go for a little more, actually.

Fardania glanced up to check on Alice.

The young girl's facial expression made it clear that the meal was delicious, but not enough.

"Master, could I have two more orders of the same? One for me, and one for the girl here."

"Aye. I'm already making them, so hold tight."

Fardania chuckled at the master's response. She felt as though he'd seen through her completely.

Whatever. I'll forgive you, just for today, because of the girl.

The young elf decided to enjoy the "rice burger" instead of picking a fight. It had been some time since she'd last eaten a meal with another person. As someone on a quest, with a very specific goal, moments like these were important to Fardania.

The two elves exited the restaurant as the sun rose farther into the sky.

It's about time I head to the next town, but...

Fardania prepared her things while Alice watched. The child's silence was likely due to her full stomach. The older elf looked at the young girl abandoned by her town and family. Even if Alice went back home, she'd never truly be happy. That knowledge drove Fardania to speak.

"If you're interested in gourmet cooking, would you like to come with me?"

It was pure happenstance that Fardania had run into this young elf on her journey. If she took the girl with her, Alice would undoubtedly delay her quest by at least a decade.

Things were dangerous enough for a single female elf traveling the world. Fardania had fought off monsters and all manner of bandits during her time alone. Although she was skilled for her age, and confident in her abilities, she

wasn't talented enough to fight with such a significant burden.

Despite knowing all of this, however, she couldn't just abandon the girl. Alice's young age wouldn't let her.

"Um...um..." Alice tilted her head. It wasn't clear whether she truly understood the question. "Will I be able to make rice burgers, too?"

"Probably."

Fardania couldn't give a definitive answer. After all, she still hadn't even figured out how to make soy sauce. That said, she was eager to discover the recipe.

Perhaps Fardania's feelings had come through. Alice grabbed her hand gently. "Kay, I'll go with you!"

She was still terribly young, but deep down, Alice understood. She had no home in that town, where her siblings would always look at her as an "other." Her kind mother and father were no longer there for her.

"Wonderful. I'm looking forward to traveling together, Alice. How about we swing by a human town first? We have to get you ready for our trip!"

Fardania accepted everything as if it were the most natural choice in the world, readying her new travel partner for the road ahead.

Years later, Alice came to be known worldwide as the founder of elven cuisine and Fardania's star pupil. This was the very beginning of their journey.

Chapter 63:

Rice Burger, Once More **7:30 a.m.**

After watching the two elves eat their rice burgers, accept some grilled rice balls, and head home, the master sighed in relief.

Everything turned out okay.

The customers had come way too early. They also couldn't eat Nekoya's butter rolls, which was even worse. The master had offered them cold rice, and although the odds were against him, he still managed to satisfy both elves' stomachs. He couldn't help taking pride in his work.

Rice burgers, huh...?

As he sat alone in the empty restaurant, the master found himself somewhat disappointed. Elves typically couldn't handle meat dishes, and there wasn't much he could do about that.

All sorts of people couldn't eat certain foods, whether due to religion, culture, or simply taste. It wasn't uncommon for customers to ask for dishes without particular ingredients.

Still, the master's personal opinion was that rice burger patties with meat were the most delicious.

Mixed vegetable tempura rice burgers ain't bad or anything. Still, rice burgers really shine when they've got meat in 'em.

That didn't mean that the tempura rice burgers he offered vegetarian customers were awful. The master had grown up eating his grandfather's food, so there weren't really any dishes he couldn't stomach. He prided himself on never offering customers anything that he personally didn't consider delicious.

It was just that, as a hard-working, middle-aged man, the master didn't think mixed vegetable tempura rice burgers were quite enough.

Crap. Now I kinda want one.

He rubbed his stomach gently. He'd done a whole lot of work before breakfast, so he was pretty hungry.

I guess I could make one now, but it's a little early for something that heavy.

"Good morning, Master!"

I have arrived.

The sound of bells ringing signaled Aletta and Kuro's arrival. The master greeted them the same way he always did.

"Yo, g'morning, ladies. I'll be counting on you both today. But first, time to make some grub. Hold on."

Rice burgers are best served at dinnertime.

He'd reasoned his way to that answer as he looked at Aletta's big smile. Rice burgers were basically giant balls of rice and meat. That sort of thing was a tad too much for breakfast.

Also, Aletta preferred bread. Apparently, her region lacked easy access to rice. One of the regulars—a samurai-like older man—had told the master that rice was far more common in western areas of the continent.

Aletta would never complain about eating rice in the morning, and she'd surely enjoy it. Still, she reacted much more strongly to bread. Thinking about that had made the master reconsider serving rice burgers in the morning.

All right! I'll put some time aside for 'em!

With the matter settled in his mind, the master began working on breakfast.

Eventually, the sun set, and the customers who'd dropped by for drinks went home. It was time to wait for the "final customer" to visit, as she always did.

"All right," said the master. "How about we have some dinner?"

"Okay!" Aletta nodded vigorously, having been secretly waiting for those words.

Staff mealtimes at the Restaurant to Another World differed, depending on how busy the morning and evening shifts were.

The folks who could be called Nekoya's main customers arrived before noon. That demographic was highly diverse in terms of age, gender, and race. They

typically sought hearty meals.

Then there were the folks who showed up in the afternoon—nobles wearing beautiful dresses, priests and priestesses with silver and gold sigils hanging from their necks, and even a great, wise mage. They typically dropped by seeking the sweets that the master’s childhood friend, a pâtissier, made.

At night, ogres, dwarves, and powerful warriors came for booze alongside their food. Aletta didn’t find alcohol particularly tasty, but according to some regulars, the stuff in Nekoya’s world was much stronger and better-tasting than any liquor from their world.

The one thing these customers shared was that they dropped by Nekoya whenever they could, which meant there was a massive difference between when the restaurant was busy and when it wasn’t. If multiple halflings visited at the same time, for example, things would be incredibly hectic, even long after the sun had set.

In those situations, staff meals took place whenever they could squeeze them in. For someone like Aletta—who would spend the entire day on her feet interacting with customers—by mealtime, her stomach was completely empty. She could comfortably and enthusiastically eat at any time of day.

“Just hold on,” said the master. “I’m making something right now. Today I have a brand-new dish.”

“Yay!” Aletta smiled.

“Kuro, you’ll have the usual, right?”

Yes. Thank you.

Aletta felt her expectations rise as she watched the master work in the kitchen.

A new dish—in other words, a meal completely unknown to Aletta. She wasn’t worried in the slightest, though. She knew that everything the master made was delicious.

Quite some time had passed since Aletta started working at the Restaurant to Another World. Since then, the master had learned the sorts of foods she liked.

Each staff meal was completely different from the one before, and the food was always unbelievably tasty.

So much so that, on occasion, Aletta felt bad that Kuro only ever ate curry.

“I’m done! Dinner’s served.”

The cheerful master held a plate of the same food in each hand. He placed one directly in front of Aletta.

She gulped loudly as she watched the master return to the kitchen to grab the curry.

“Wow...! This smells amazing.” Aletta voiced her honest opinion. The scent wafting off the dish was positively tantalizing.

Two brown morsels sat on the white plate in front of her. A flat, round, brownish object topped each. Underneath were assorted ingredients—meat and green vegetables. Beneath those was another flat, round, brownish object.

The two morsels each smelled delicious, and their shape reminded Aletta of a familiar dish.

They look like hamburgers, but...

Aletta was used to hamburgers composed of a meat dish called “hamburg” sandwiched between pieces of bread. A certain group of three boys used to order that dish often, although Aletta hadn’t seen them in some time.

She had even eaten a hamburger during a past staff meal. It was delicious—the rich meat juices mixed wonderfully with the sour red vegetable sauce.

This dish was different, however. The aroma wafting off it wasn’t vegetable sauce but soy sauce. Of that much, Aletta was certain.

Also, the bread’s color was all wrong.

“Yup! These are my special rice burgers.” As if answering Aletta’s internal question, the master introduced the dish, setting curry down in front of Kuro. “They’re especially tasty while they’re still hot, so don’t wait too long.”

The master sat across from the demon girl and put his hands together. “Let’s

dig in.”

He immediately grabbed the burger with both hands and took a bite.

“Mm! This is damn good.”

He nodded, satisfied. The exquisite taste reminded him that the ability to immediately make whatever food he wanted to eat was a perk of being a chef.

“Um, thanks, oh god of demons. I offer you my gratitude!”

No longer able to resist after watching the master dig voraciously into his rice burger, Aletta hurried through an abridged version of her usual prayer. She cleaned her hands on a towel, then followed the master’s lead and reached for her own burger.

She picked up the burger with both hands. As she brought it close to her nose, the scent of cooked meat and soy sauce was a shock to her system.

Aletta reached her limit.

Like the master, she took a decisive bite of the burger.

Dewishus!

The moment she bit down, intense, hearty flavors struck her—the aromatic, sweet and salty, biscuit-like outside layers and the meat sandwiched between them.

The flavors combined in her mouth, creating a fierce, savory taste. The meat was strongly seasoned, the fatty beef was sweet and hot, and the sesame seeds gave the hamburger a distinct aroma.

The more Aletta chewed, the more she tasted the green pepper’s bitter flavor, the oranie that had absorbed the meat’s juices, and the fresh leafy vegetables that covered the rest of the ingredients.

The meat’s flavor would have been too strong by itself. However, thanks to the “bread” and greens, as well as the cooked veggies, the entire dish had a single, unified flavor.

Aletta recalled a similar dish she’d become aware of since she started working at Nekoya. *This is just like karubidon!*

That meat dish had proven a favorite of a wealthy noble girl who dropped by occasionally. (Aletta knew little about noble customs, but even she could tell that the way the young lady held herself differed from the average commoner.) Does that mean this “bread” is actually rice?

Karubidon also featured meat atop soft, white rice, and its flavor was quite similar. The meat in Aletta’s meal, however, was sandwiched between balls of cooked rice flavored with soy sauce. Even as someone who wasn’t that crazy about rice, Aletta found this particular recipe delicious and easy to eat.

So then, what’s this one...?

Finishing the rice burger that so reminded her of karubidon, Aletta turned her attention to the other morsel in front of her. It looked even more like the hamburgers she was familiar with.

Although there was no cheese in the dish, the flat, round meat patty was undoubtedly hamburger steak. The “bread” was made of cooked rice, as it had been in the last one.

Now that Aletta thought about it, the lizard-legged demon and his human friend who dropped by the restaurant really liked hamburger steak. They usually ate it with rice, which made Aletta think that maybe hamburger steak and rice paired together well.

This is probably tasty, too, Aletta thought.

She took a bite of the rice burger, expectations running high.

Wha...?!

The flavor sent Aletta into a spiral of confusion. This was undoubtedly hamburger steak, yet at the same time, it wasn’t.

The tender meat coming apart in her mouth did indeed pair well with the cooked rice. Raw slices of oranie, likely added as hidden flavor, lay between the rice buns. They added a refreshing heat to the dish, bringing out the teriyaki-flavored hamburger steak’s sweetness.

“Ah, I mixed chicken meat and cartilage into that one,” the master explained, chuckling. “The stuff I ate back when I was a kid tasted like that.”

Aletta's expression was befuddled. This wasn't the usual meat the master served at Nekoya but chicken. The cartilage in the patty gave the whole dish a crunchy texture.

The master had added teriyaki sauce to replicate a flavor he recalled tasting when he was just a child.

"In any case, if it doesn't taste good, then..."

Aletta answered him with silence. She was entirely focused on finishing her meal.

"Well, apparently, that won't be an issue," the master said.

Damn, he thought. No matter how many years go by, there ain't no better feeling than having someone eat food you made for them.

That should have been obvious to the master. Nevertheless, watching Aletta reconfirmed what he already knew. He certainly loved to eat, but he also loved it when other folks ate his cooking.

Once Aletta was finished, he asked with a smile, "So? How was it?"

"That was amazingly delicious!"

Aletta's words and expression contained no dishonesty. She wasn't being polite, either. The demon girl was simply voicing her honest-to-goodness opinion.

"Cool, cool. Think it's good enough to put on the menu?"

Aletta took a moment to reflect on the master's question before nodding.

"Um... Yes. I think customers would pay good money for this."

She could already think of a few regulars who would probably enjoy rice burgers.

"I see, I see. I guess I'll throw it on there, then."

Hearing Aletta's answer, the master decided to have the rest of his staff try the dish after the weekend.

Adding new menu items was a regular occurrence at Nekoya. First, the master would serve something as a staff meal and then as a daily special. If the

feedback was good, he'd add the dish to the menu. That process was part of how Nekoya worked.

It wouldn't be long before Nekoya's menu included the rice burger.

Chapter 64:

Scone

On a Saturday night, just after the Restaurant to Another World had finished business for the day, the master of the Flying Puppy cake shop upstairs dropped in.

“Yo!” he called. “Sorry for swinging by so late. Oh, awesome! Aletta’s here, too.”

Aletta had finished cleaning the restaurant and eaten her late dinner. She’d already seen off the other waitress, who’d left immediately after finishing her curry. In fact, Aletta was preparing to head home herself.

Then, with seemingly perfect timing, the Flying Puppy’s pâtissier had come by.

“Well, ain’t this rare. You hardly ever show up this late,” Nekoya’s master said to his childhood friend.

The Flying Puppy typically closed around 7:00 p.m. Even with cleanup and prep for the next day, it was rare for the pâtissier to be around by the time Nekoya closed its doors.

“Well, I was a wee bit busy after closing. You see, I’ve been considering a plan for the start of spring break.”

In response to the master’s confusion, the pâtissier showed his friend that his left hand held a basket covered with a beautiful cloth. He reached into the basket and pulled something out.

“Wow, how beautiful!”

The words slipped out of Aletta’s mouth naturally. The pâtissier held a transparent glass jar with a golden cover. Inside was a thick, translucent red substance.

The master immediately recognized what he was looking at. “Whoa! Strawberry jam, eh?”

The pâtissier nodded.

“Ding, ding! I’m holding a limited-time-only spring strawberry blowout. Instead of the usual cake loyalty card jazz, folks can grab these! I’m using strawberries I got for cheap from farmers I have contracts with. Still, I can guarantee their flavor! And this one right here...”

He handed the bottle to Aletta.

Aletta took it without thinking, but the pâtissier’s actions confused her. “Huh? Wha...?”

The pâtissier smiled as he explained.

“It’s a present for you, Aletta! I put a little extra sugar in that one, so it’ll last longer. But just in case, make sure to keep it someplace cool once you open it. Don’t save it for too long.”

“Wait...this is for me?! Are you sure?” Finally understanding what was going on, Aletta voiced her surprise.

The pâtissier in front of her was responsible for all the amazing confections that charmed the noblemen, noblewomen, princesses, priests, and priestesses who visited Nekoya. This same man was now offering her a jar of jam—fruit and sugar boiled together. Aletta didn’t think jam was pricier than the Flying Puppy’s cookies, but still, she knew it was fairly expensive.

The pâtissier nodded. “Of course! You’re one of my best customers, aren’t you? You buy our biggest box of cookies each week, after all.”

Aletta was able to purchase the cookies at a special employee rate. Nevertheless, she always bought the largest box, every seven days, without fail. There weren’t many customers who did that, so it was reason enough for the pâtissier to treat Aletta as one of his “best.”

“I was thinking about having you taste it first, so I made these.”

The pâtissier took the cloth off the basket. He pulled out several baked goods about the size of closed fists. They were significantly smaller than the jar he’d handed Aletta.

“Oooh, scones, eh? Been a while,” the master said to his friend.

“Right? I figured the best way to enjoy jam was with something simple. Like

this, you know? So I baked some. How about you grab a pot of black tea, and we indulge in a little late-night snack together?" The pâtissier left the kitchen and sat at the closest table.

"Sounds good to me! Let me go brew some tea. Aletta, give me a hand."

"Okay! I can't wait!"

Both the master and Aletta accepted the pâtissier's invitation. Together, they quickly brewed the tea and grabbed chairs.

"Now then, dig in! It's on me," the pâtissier said once they sat down.

The three began their late-night tea party.

Aletta took her first bite of scone without putting anything on it.

Huh? It's not very sweet.

The scone was still hot from the oven and tasted of wheat and butter. But it wasn't sweet in the least.

The master and pâtissier both opted to leave their scones plain as well.

"Mm. This is good stuff," said the master. "You can really taste the wheat."

"Right? Not that it holds a candle to the bread at Kimura's place, but..." The pâtissier grabbed the jam jar. "All right. Now try the scone with this. That's the whole point of this little gathering."

He stuffed a spoon into the jam and handed the jar to Aletta.

"It's full of strawberry bits. Plop some jam right on top of the scone, and make sure to spread it."

"O-okay. Here I go."

Following the pâtissier's instructions, Aletta scooped jam out of the jar, dropping it onto the scone. The thick preserve contained plenty of berry pieces. Absorbing the light from the ceiling, it shone a beautiful red, like some kind of diamond.

It'd almost be a waste to eat it.



With that thought running through her mind, Aletta bit into the scone. The strawberries' flavor exploded on her tongue, bringing out the heavily sugared jam's sweetness.

As Aletta chewed, the jam's flavor spread through her mouth. She tasted fruit juice oozing from the larger strawberry chunks.

And then there was the bread the pâtissier had called a "scone."

I understand why the scone wasn't sweet... It was for this!

By itself, the scone was just a piece of bread. With jam, however, it became a delightful confection.

"Mm! This is damn good," the master said. "You could definitely sell this."

"Right? I thought this year's batch was especially delicious."

Both the master and pâtissier seemed satisfied with the flavor and were convinced that the preserves would sell.

"But, you know..." The master seemed to realize something. "All right. Hold on real quick."

He left for the kitchen, returning with a plate of something.

"What's that?"

"Cream cheese," the master replied. "I figured this jam of yours would go well with it." He set the dish down on the table, placing a spoon next to it.

"That's what I'm talking about!" the pâtissier said happily. "Jam and cream cheese do pair really well." He loaded a scone with both and bit into it.

After scarfing the scone and downing a cup of tea, the pâtissier let out a satisfied sigh. "Yup. That's the ticket. My stomach's real happy."

"You'll put on the pounds if you keep eating like that, pal." The master chuckled at his friend, piling cream cheese and jam onto his own scone.

After watching the pair go at the jam and cream cheese, Aletta followed suit, and found herself enjoying the flavor deeply.

He's right! Jam and cream cheese go together amazingly well!

The similar-yet-distinct sour flavors of the strawberry jam and milky cheese combined on the wheaty scone and brought out the best in one another.

Now that I think about it, the cheesecake we sell to Hilda always has jam on it, too.

The demon mercenary—now a regular of Nekoya—loved cheesecake, which was always topped with berry sauce.

Aletta finally understood why.

“Whew...”

“That’s all of ’em, eh?”

“Yup. I’m thinking maybe we ate too much.”

The trio sipped from their teacups, their stomachs full.

After a moment, the pâtissier turned to Aletta.

“So, what did you think of the jam?”

Aletta smiled wide. She was once again reminded that the other world’s food was really something special.

“It was amazing. Mmm... Super amazing.”

“Awesome! In that case, take it with you. Heck, take two! Sorry about the first one being open already.”

With that, the pâtissier handed Aletta a basket containing a sealed jam jar, as well as the jar they’d opened just moments earlier.

“Thank you so much! I’ll make sure to eat it all.”

I’ll give Lady Shia the one that isn’t open yet.

After all, the jam was Aletta’s gift for always buying cookies. Since Shia was the one who paid, Aletta thought that she should give her boss’s little sister the better jar.

Hmm... Aletta thought quietly. But the jar that’s already open has to be eaten right away, so...

Later, Shia and the boss got into a light scuffle over the “candied berries.” Aletta solved the problem by handing over a second jar of the stuff. Little did she realize that she’d earned major brownie points with the pair by doing so.

Chapter 65:

Strawberry Yogurt Mousse Running her finger across the smooth book's beautifully written characters, Anna found herself unsure.

What should I order...?

She glanced at her peers sitting at the table. They were equally indecisive.

"Hrrrm... Too many options, too little time!"

"It never gets easy, does it? I know I want something chocolatey, but..."

They were all completely different from the head of their monastery, who only ever ordered pound cake and seasonal ice cream.

About twelve months had passed since Anna and her peers started visiting the Restaurant to Another World, which offered all sorts of delicious, otherworldly dishes.

A year ago, Celestine—the high priestess of the Lord of Light and Lord Leonard's supposed successor, said to be skilled enough even for the position of pope—took three of her most talented disciples from the monastery to the Restaurant to Another World.

Carlotta, despite being of common birth, had years of experience. At the monastery, she was second only to Celestine. A few years prior, she had been summoned to the Great Shrine in the Kingdom's capital to participate in the Lich Hunt. There, she'd defeated countless undead.

Julianne, a high-born resident of the Kingdom, knew what a life of true luxury on the Eastern Continent was like. She had many connections to the world outside the monastery.

And then there was Anna.

Celestine brought these three women to the Restaurant to Another World.

After racking her brains, Anna picked a confection that she'd never eaten, made from her favorite fruit.

Hmm... Maybe I'll go with this. I've never tried it, after all.

The menu described the dish as pudding-like and made from “strawberries.” It was just the right season for them. Anna was confident in her choice. She was well aware that all the menu's sweets were delicious, and also of the reason Celestine had brought her to the restaurant.

Although she wasn't even twenty years old, Anna was ordained as a priestess and was fairly talented to boot. However, within her organization, she was only “fairly” talented.

While she certainly had strong magical powers, Anna lacked the talent or skill to use them properly. Her swordsmanship wasn't anything to write home about, either. She wasn't remotely comparable to Celestine or even Carlotta—women who wielded swords in the Lord of Light's name and, as Holy Knights, struck down evil beings.

So, although Anna's magical powers were top-class within the monastery, plenty of other priestesses were more talented. Furthermore, the young woman wasn't particularly knowledgeable, nor did she have useful connections outside.

Anna didn't know the names or faces of the parents who'd brought her into the world. She might have been some low-rank noble or even a commoner. Either way, her parents hadn't welcomed her arrival.

Having decided that raising Anna would be too much hassle, they took their newborn to a church and handed her over.

Thus, by the time Anna was conscious of her surroundings, she'd spent her entire life in the church's narrow confines. She knew of nothing else and lacked the wide breadth of knowledge Julianne had obtained living in the Eastern Continent's capital until adulthood. Anna was ignorant of the colorful social life her peer knew.

So why exactly did Celestine choose Anna for the honorable job of recreating the Restaurant to Another World's sweets? The reason was simple. Anna was a

changeling.

Despite human parentage, Anna was a half-elf, so she might live far longer than the average human. Celestine expected Anna to pass down the knowledge she gained at the Restaurant to Another World.

Changelings had no place in the current world, which revolved around humanity.

Humans looked down upon half-elves with ire. They were said to be the reason for the collapse of the first human nation, the Ancient Kingdom. You didn't belong within human society if you were a half-elf. You would be exiled.

Since half-elves could live for centuries, they appeared young for the duration of a human's entire life. To humans, this was a disturbing reminder of their own mortality.

Still, half-elves' long life spans were extremely useful when it came to recording knowledge for the future. If a half-elf remembered something, they could keep passing down that information for over a hundred years—far longer than the average human.

My job is to eat all sorts of things and remember them for a really long time. That way, I can teach the people of the future.

For that very reason, it wasn't entirely uncommon for half-elves to become priests or join mage guilds, with the long-term goal of handing down knowledge and skills through records and the spoken word. Still, to prevent the Ancient Kingdom's mistakes from unfolding once more, half-elves never received top-level positions. Nevertheless, for half-elves, that sort of life was far better than the alternatives.

After hearing her peers order, Anna spoke up, uttering the name of a confection available only in springtime.

"I'll have this strawberry yogurt mousse stuff, please."

As Anna chatted with her companions, and some folks visiting from around

the world, their sweets arrived.

“Sorry about the wait! Here’s your pound cake and black tea set, chocolate cake and black tea set, baked cheesecake and coffee set, and strawberry yogurt mousse and black tea set!”

The waitress placed their orders on the table—Celestine’s beloved pound cake, incredible chocolate cake that even Julianne had never seen outside the other world, and cheesecake that smelled ever so slightly of the otherworldly alcohol called “brandy.”

And, of course, the strawberry yogurt mousse. It was red like the berries, but also white like milk, and the plate was decorated with fruit. For Anna, it was a completely new dessert.

I see... It really does look just like pudding.

While some other desserts also included quartered strawberries decorated with whipped cream, the appearance of the mousse in the center of the plate was more similar to pudding.

Let’s start with the berries.

Deciding to leave the mousse for later, Anna began by eating the decorative strawberries.

The mousse was garnished only with red strawberries, unlike the almond pudding often ordered by a half-elf mage who frequented the restaurant. Anna picked up a strawberry with her small fork and tossed it into her mouth.

Mmm... The other world’s berries are really quite sweet.

Whipped cream topped the red berries, which were a touch sour, but otherwise very sweet. Their juice was actually more sugary than that of any berry Anna had encountered, including those she’d bought from merchants.

The berries’ sweet and sour flavor, mixed with the whipped cream’s gentle sweetness, spread throughout her mouth. Frankly, until Anna had first visited the other world, she hadn’t been particularly well-versed in desserts. As far as her personal taste was concerned, the berries and cream were more than enough to make a delightful treat.

All right. Next.

After thoroughly enjoying the berries and cream, Anna turned her attention to the main attraction. She poked her fork into the strawberry yogurt mousse and brought a small piece to her lips.

The moment the mousse entered her mouth, Anna understood. She could tell that the dish was unlike the pudding she'd once ordered.

It's different, but still tasty.

Tiny holes filled the firm mousse. Anna crushed it under her tongue, pushing the juices and air from within the holes out into her mouth.

On their own, strawberries had a dessert-like sweetness, but it was much weaker in the mousse. Instead, their tanginess was stronger. Nevertheless, the dish tasted great.

It's less sugary than the strawberry garnish, but it's really good.

The mousse was neither cloying nor bland. Anna guessed that combining it with the extremely sweet strawberries and whipped cream brought out the best in each ingredient.

The strawberries and cream harmonized with the mousse. By changing how much you ate in a single bite, you could adjust the dish's sweetness and sourness.

I really do think the other world's desserts are far more advanced than ours.

The sweets in this world were like delicate works of art. That applied to all the cakes the restaurant served.

I have to do more research, Anna mused.

However, this was just the excuse she gave herself to continue eating. Before long, the mousse had vanished into her stomach.

"Whew...!"

Anna let out a contented sigh as she drank her sugared black tea. Today's order was once again delicious.

After I get home, I'll have to document everything.

Enjoying the flavor of the tea in her mouth, Anna pondered how to record the day's visit in her parchment.

Sweets, sweets, sweets.

Her research had only just begun in earnest and would likely continue far beyond her own extended life span. The path ahead of her was long, which was precisely why she felt it necessary to take things step by step.

Hundreds of years in the future, Anna's hard work proved to be a massive stepping stone for those who sought to enter the world of sweets.

Chapter 66:

French Onion Soup She ordered otherworldly booze whenever she swung by the restaurant. She'd done that since she was young, and it was how she liked to enjoy the Restaurant to Another World.

Her name was Bridgette. She was both a heavy drinker and a high priestess who served the Lord of Light. Since youth, she'd sent countless liches to the afterlife and had even become known as the Dwarf Killer.

In the evening, Bridgette finished her nutritious dinner and then watched the women of the monastery return to their rooms for the night. After making sure everyone was indoors, she headed for the monastery head's private training ground and stepped through the magical door that appeared there.

Bridgette glanced around the room, bells ringing in her ears. She saw a western warrior enjoying some chicken with his drink, an old female dwarf who liked fish—and drank as heavily as Bridgette—and the great sage from the Kingdom, dining on his usual pork loin cutlet with some ale.

Bridgette checked to see whether her drinking partner was there.

Hmph. I guess not.

She didn't know whether they simply hadn't come in that night or if they'd already gone home. Either way, it was too bad.

There were hardly any customers at this time of the evening—not that the restaurant was ever really that busy. Still, it was nice and quiet in the dining room with only the hushed sounds of a handful of visitors eating their meals.

It's fine. This is cozy in its own way.

Bridgette thought there was something enjoyable about drinking with a friend she could let her guard down around. However, she was also fond of having a drink on her own. She claimed a clean, open table for herself and sat.

As soon as she did, a weathered-looking old man with intense energy appeared. He was the restaurant's master, and he wanted to know what Bridgette would be drinking.

"Welcome! Ready to order?"

Bridgette decided to go with otherworldly grape alcohol and the master's choice of side order.

"Umm, I'll start with wine. Right now, I'm in the mood for white. Any finger foods are fine with me."

"Aye! You got it." The master considered what appetizer to serve with Bridgette's drink. He seemed to have something in mind. "I'm thinkin' it's time to bust out those sardines I just got in." He returned to the back.

It didn't take him long to reappear in front of her. He put down a glass with a single slender stem. It was full of transparent yellow liquid—white grape alcohol. Next to the glass was a small piece of hard bread topped with fish and white cheese.

Bridgette nodded in satisfaction. "Mmm. This is good."

She wiped her hands with the warm cloth the master handed her and then picked up the wine glass.

As she brought it to her lips, the wine's fruity aroma drifted to her nose, and the alcohol's ever-so-slightly sweet and sour flavor washed down her throat.

Bridgette reached for the side dish she'd ordered. She enjoyed the savory flavor of the fish and its oil, as well as the soft cheese's taste and mouthfeel. She took another sip of wine with the fish's aftertaste still in her mouth and then let out a long sigh—proving that the combination was amazing and the wine's flavor spectacular.

Bridgette had already eaten her dinner that evening, so another menu item would have been too much food. Instead, she prioritized the restaurant's delicious, exclusive alcohol over its meals. If she wanted to eat something while she drank, she typically ordered light foods, like salted beans or vegetable sticks.

“Master, I’ll be making my next order. Could I get some sake, please? I think that this side dish would pair wonderfully with cold sake.”

After enjoying the grape-flavored alcohol known as wine, Bridgette ordered liquor made from a western crop called “rice.” Its fruity aroma was completely different from the wine and went superbly with fish.

“Aye! You got it. But don’t drink too much! You’ll get sick.”

The master offered a warning as he brought the drink over.

“As long as I only get one chance to drink every week, I simply can’t help myself. But I’ll take caution. This might be hard to believe, but I actually drink less now than before—maybe because of how delicious the drinks here are,” Bridgette joked.

There was truth in her words. As a former heavy drinker, Bridgette considered alcohol the one luxury she let herself fall into entirely. Lately, however, she found herself drinking less and less, except when invited to a party or banquet.

Delicious drinks became tastier the longer one waited. After realizing that simple truth, Bridgette began holding herself back, avoiding cheap alcohol so that she could better enjoy her time once a week.

“Gotcha,” the master replied with a somewhat relieved smile. “In that case, have a blast.”

“I will.” Bridgette smiled back and resumed drinking.

This is marvelous. Alcohol is truly the greatest blessing bestowed upon humanity.

Moments like this made Bridgette grateful from the bottom of her heart that she wasn’t part of the Ascetic Sect.

Bridgette had heard that the Ascetic Sect was a group of believers who hated the current pope.

The pope was charged with teaching and guiding priests and priestesses of the Lord of Light, the deity who’d defeated the dark lord worshiped by demons across the continent. Even now, the Ascetic Sect believed in suppressing all

their desires. They focused on lives of training, totally ignorant of the mortal world's joys.

When the current pope was only a high priest who traveled the land with other heroes, the Ascetic Sect was the main branch of the Lord of Light's followers. Bridgette found that hard to believe. She'd gone through the year-long Acceptance Ritual, and joined the Acceptance Sect, long after the current pope defeated the dark lord and became the Lord of Light's representative.

Bridgette had heard that the Ascetic Sect still held a heavy grudge, and that they were raising talented children to become high priests and priestesses, preparing for the day the pope passed on.

Now then...

Bridgette drank by herself for a while, enjoying the other world's alcohol and then considered ending the day's adventure. After a number of top-ups on her drink, she made her usual order.

"I think it's about time I return home, Master. Might I bother you for a bowl of French onion soup?"

The master nodded.

"Of course! It'll take a little bit... Is that okay?"

"Absolutely. No hurry, since I'll be drinking this in the meantime."

Bridgette raised her glass of brown whiskey, clear ice floating on the surface. After her usual back-and-forth with the master, she took her time enjoying the final drink of the evening.

Finishing the alcohol, Bridgette put her glass down. At almost the exact same time, the master placed her bowl on the table.

"Sorry about the wait. Here's your French onion soup."

In the white bowl, a single piece of cheese-topped bread sat within a brown soup filled with oranie. Bridgette had ordered this soup to close out her evening of drinking.

Time to indulge.

Careful not to touch the hot bowl, Bridgette reached for her sparkling clean, silver spoon. She dipped the spoon into the soup, avoiding the oranie, and brought it back up with only broth inside.

The liquid's rich brown color wasn't cloudy in the least. A wonderful aroma wafted to Bridgette's nose. The soup she drank from the spoon traveled all through her dehydrated body.

I can feel it washing over me.

The broth flowed over Bridgette's tongue. The taste of the countless meats and vegetables in the savory soup wasn't unpleasant in the least.

This single spoonful of broth was more delicious than any feast Bridgette had taken part in during her year of Acceptance. As the soup's flavor and warmth made direct contact with her body's depths, the sensation put a smile on her face.

Bridgette had her own way of enjoying French onion soup. She appreciated the broth on its own first.

Then she made sure that the next spoonful included a wealth of oranie. The oranie slices were tender, having absorbed the broth.

The second Bridgette brought the spoon to her mouth, the savory taste of the oranie and the soup melted together. Both ingredients disappeared into her stomach, leaving tremendous flavor on her tongue. Once again, she sighed with satisfaction.

Having enjoyed the soup, it was finally time to turn her attention to what she felt was the star of the dish—the single piece of melted-cheese-topped bread.

The bread had already absorbed a great deal of broth, making it soft to the touch and easy to cut with a spoon. In fact, it had turned nearly the same color as the soup it floated on, contrasting nicely with the melted yellow cheese.

As Bridgette brought the bread to her mouth and chewed, soup burst from within.

The flavors of the amazing soup, soft bread, and cheese combined to offer Bridgette what could only be described as the flavor to end all flavors.

Bridgette sometimes felt as though she drank alcohol specifically so she could follow it with this experience.

Ah! This is wonderful. This is how you wrap up a night of drinking.

Her final spoonful of soup signaled the end of her evening. Bridgette paid the master and left.

Exiting the bright restaurant, she returned to the dark monastery.

Careful not to stumble on her way back to her room, she thought, *One day, I'll have to entrust that door to my successor.*

Although Bridgette still looked young, she was actually getting up there in years. Whether she was promoted or simply retired, the time would eventually come for another high priest or priestess to take her place as head of the monastery.

Well, no point in thinking about that now.

As Bridgette returned to her room, she was filled with curiosity about how her successor would handle the door.

This occurred some ten years before her successor, Celestine, came along and took Bridgette's place.

Chapter 67: Fried Chicken

Keeping his distance to avoid blood splatters, Tatsugorou watched the huge body. It had been a long, grueling battle.

“Is it finally over?”

The warrior had just slain a monster called the Hag. The large beast had resembled an old woman and had wielded a giant, rusty knife the size of Tatsugorou himself. The foul being had drunk the blood of travelers. It was quick and powerful.

When Tatsugorou dropped by the village by chance, its residents had desperately pleaded with him to do something about the evil monster abducting and eating local children. Tatsugorou defeated the horrendous monster—said to slice, dice, and easily devour average adventurers—in exchange for coin.

“Phew...” The warrior massaged his aching body gently as he whispered to himself. “I’m getting too old for this.”

Tatsugorou’s pain didn’t result from an injury. He wasn’t yet old enough to let one of the Hag’s mighty, almost certainly fatal blows hit him. Nevertheless, he’d risked his life in so many battles that pain overwhelmed him the moment the fight with the Hag ended.

Tatsugorou’s body had been more than willing to participate in combat. But as soon as the battle was over, pain paralyzed him, forcing him to halt his travels.

“Oh, well.” He briefly considered the prospect of resting at an inn. “I suppose I’ll take a few days, and... No.”

A smile crossed his face as he realized something.

“Tomorrow’s the Day of Satur.”

As far as Tatsugorou could recall, the closest door in the region was about half a day from the town by foot. The moment he remembered this, his arms and

legs stopped aching.

Geez. My body's certainly simpleminded.

Chuckling, Tatsugorou decapitated the Hag, then plopped its head into his bag and hurried back to the village that had hired him.

If I leave now, I can reach a nearby inn before sunset. Tomorrow, I can drop in on the restaurant early and enjoy drinking all day!

The warrior's steps were as light as feathers, as if he had returned to his youth.

When Tatsugorou returned to the village with the Hag's head, the people threw a feast of gratitude.

Tatsugorou wrapped things up there early and managed to arrive in the next town before sunset the following day.

Nekoya's door appeared just as the sun reached the center of the sky.

Tatsugorou hadn't been able to visit any locations with doors recently. As a result, it had been quite some time since he'd visited the Restaurant to Another World.

Come to think of it, it's been nearly a month.

His mouth watered. The feast the villagers threw him had been delicious, but there was nothing like Nekoya's food.

He placed his hand on the familiar door handle, expectations high.

I'll have the usual... No.

As he surveyed his surroundings, Tatsugorou struck his usual order of teriyaki chicken and sake from his mind. He decided to order something a little different that night.

The summer weather in the village was different from his homeland's clinging heat but hot nonetheless. As such, there was a specific dish Tatsugorou desperately wanted to eat.

He stepped through the doorway with this in mind.

Ringling bells signaled the summer heat's disappearance, and a magical device in the restaurant blew cool air over the tired warrior.

Aletta greeted Tatsugorou, a tad surprised that an evening regular had arrived so early in the day.

"Welcome! You're here early."

"You could say I was a little excited."

Tatsugorou sat at a table, preparing to order.

"Today, I'd like fried chicken with bones. Hold the cabbage. I'll have it with... What'd you call it again? That 'gin and tonic' stuff."

Normally, fried chicken had a bit too much grease for Tatsugorou's aging body. Sometimes, however, he craved it, especially after a fierce battle. He'd give his usual teriyaki chicken and sake a rest for today.

"A-all right. Hold on one moment."

Aletta accepted Tatsugorou's order, somewhat frightened. Tatsugorou hurried the waitress politely, doing his best to keep his demeanor in check.

"Mm. Be quick, if you would."

As the warrior waited for his order, he thought back on all the fried chicken he'd missed out on.

It's been quite some time.

The soft, sweet teriyaki chicken tasted good, but the aromatic flavor of Tatsugorou's greasy order was something else. If he ate it every time he visited the restaurant, the grease would be too much. Indulging every now and then, however, provided a completely different experience.

Tatsugorou gazed at the kitchen, sipping his ice water as he waited impatiently for the dish.

A black-haired girl approached with his order in hand, her presence almost undetectable. Her small frame was incredibly powerful. She carried a long, fluted glass filled with alcohol and a plate of sizzling-hot fried chicken.

Here's your fried chicken and your gin and tonic.

Fried chicken wasn't like Nekoya's other fried dishes, and it didn't really pair well with any of the restaurant's sauces. Therefore, a single yellow lemon cut into the shape of a comb sat next to the chicken on the plate.

"Mmm. Wonderful."

The still-hot meat's smell wafted from the plate, prompting Tatsugorou to sip his gin and tonic.

The cold, fruity drink bubbled in his mouth. The gin was intense, but the fruity flavor was sour in the most refreshing of ways, and the carbonation provided a shock to the system.

Tatsugorou couldn't help but moan in pleasure. "Nnnmm."

The gin and tonic tasted sharp, unlike the sake he usually drank, and was entirely different from the bitter ale common on the Eastern Continent. The liquid made its way across his tongue and down his throat, leaving behind a cool sensation.

It was the perfect drink for the middle of a summer day. Its flavor suited the times when Tatsugorou wanted nothing more than to go straight to an inn and sleep soundly from dusk to dawn.

Now then, time to dig in.

Tatsugorou made his way through half of the gin and tonic before ordering a second drink. He cleaned his hands with the warm cloth he'd received after he arrived. Then he reached for the fried chicken. His fingertips felt the fatty drumstick's heat, almost hot enough to burn him. That told Tatsugorou that the meat was properly cooked even before he ate it.

As the chicken's delicious aroma enveloped the warrior, he took a big bite.

Ooh... OOOOOH!

The crunchy skin tasted like soy sauce and spices. The moment Tatsugorou's teeth dug in, juices from inside the chicken came pouring out. It was young meat—an older chicken couldn't have had that flavor.

The meat's rich skin and hidden juices combined with the breading's slight

crunchiness, leaving their flavors in Tatsugorou's mouth.

I can't get enough.

After indulging in the chicken for a while, he reached for his gin and tonic and took a sip. The drink's sharp, carbonated flavor washed away the taste of the fatty chicken meat. The flavors were altogether different than those of teriyaki chicken and sake.

Next up...

After devouring a single piece of chicken, Tatsugorou shifted to the small yellow lemon sitting next to the meat. His thick fingers grabbed the fruit and squeezed, its intensely sour juice pouring all over the meat.

Once the lemon was completely juiced, Tatsugorou returned it to his plate and picked up another piece of chicken.

Mmm. From the second piece on, everything needs that lemon flavor.

With lemon juice, the fried chicken became even easier to eat. The lemon's strong, sour flavor held up well against the powerful taste of the meat and breading. They complemented each other as though it was their destiny.

Tatsugorou always started by eating a piece of chicken without any lemon juice. However, he paired every piece after that with the sour condiment. The warrior had developed those rules for himself after eating fried chicken several times.

I'd say it's about time for my second dish.

Tatsugorou made his way through three glasses of gin and tonic alongside his fried chicken and then called Aletta over.

"Excuse me—could I get seconds? This time, no bones. Oh, and some rice."

Rice was indeed spectacular with fried chicken. It was slightly sweet, which paired well with the meat's strong, greasy taste. The combination brought the meal to a new level.

I'm going to take my time and enjoy this. It's still early, after all!

The alcohol was starting to affect Tatsugorou, putting him in a pleasant mood

as he excitedly awaited his order. His food came out fairly quickly, making it clear that the master had probably anticipated Tatsugorou's impatience.

This time, Aletta brought the order. White rice and a bowl of brown miso soup sat beside the boneless fried chicken, which was cut into pieces just big enough to grab with chopsticks.

"Sorry for the wait," Aletta said. "Here's your rice and fried chicken."

"Ho ho!" Tatsugorou took his chopsticks in hand. Given his age, his strength and appetite were surprising. "Can't drink alcohol without following it up with the good stuff!"

The taste was exactly the same, but there was something different about eating boneless fried chicken with chopsticks. The chicken was small enough to eat in one or two bites. Tatsugorou left the vegetables on the plate for later, raising the meat to his lips.

The warrior tossed the chicken into his mouth and chewed, releasing the greasy juices.

The aftertaste was still present as Tatsugorou dug into the white rice on the porcelain dish.

Mmm! Alcohol's great, but rice is truly the best!

The sweet rice had absorbed the rich fried chicken's flavor, creating a new taste.

Uh-oh. I'd better watch myself. At this rate, I'll end up eating too much.

Nearly half the rice disappeared with a single piece of chicken. Although the combination wasn't quite as divine as rice and teriyaki chicken, Tatsugorou had to admit to himself that fried chicken went wonderfully with rice.

There was no way that the rice on the plate would last through the full order of chicken.

"Excuse me! Could I get some more rice? And another gin and tonic, please."

Tatsugorou's appetite had awoken. He didn't plan on any kind of self-restraint. He would enjoy his booze, rice, and fried chicken as much as possible.

Tatsugorou wanted to get the absolute most out of the experience.

“Phew... I ate way too much.”

Stomach stuffed to the limit, Tatsugorou finished his day of food and drink with sweet and sour lemon sherbet, made from what he guessed were frozen lemons. Licking the sherbet, Tatsugorou immediately felt the cold reach his head. The flavor itself filled him with deep satisfaction.

“I think I’m just going to relax for a bit.”

The meal complete, and his stomach ready to burst, it didn’t seem like Tatsugorou would be leaving anytime soon. This situation would have been immensely dangerous if he’d been in the middle of a journey, but since this was the Restaurant to Another World, he had nothing to worry about.

“Yo, Master! I’m here! Hmm? I smell something great!”

“What in the world? That kinda looks like roast chicken!”

As Tatsugorou relaxed, two familiar regulars dropped in—a pair of ogres. They had much sharper noses than the average human, and they used them to zone in on the delicious aroma in the room.

“Yeah. I just finished serving fried chicken.”

Since he’d dealt with Tatsugorou’s orders, the master was free to greet the pair at the door. The warrior tried to fight off the wave of drowsiness settling on him as he watched the middle-aged master politely explain the fried chicken situation to the ogres. Tatsugorou’s stomach was full, he was tipsy, and it was early afternoon—the perfect time for a nap.

The nap was so wonderful, it made the weathered Tatsugorou forget the exhaustion he’d accumulated over the past few days.

Chapter 68:

Kid's Lunch In a well-decorated corner of the huge, old castle, the twins quietly assessed the situation.

"How does it look, Alf? Are we good?"

"I think so, Mar. I don't see any lookouts."

After confirming that there were no guards—there usually were, in so-called "dangerous places"—the twins continued their "adventure."

They held hands and traveled through the giant castle, making their way to the top of a tower on the building's western side. They went one floor at a time, carefully and quietly. The twins couldn't have been more excited. They were on the path to the "witch's den."

"You must never, ever go to the tower on the castle's western side. A great witch lives there." The mother of the Duchy's first prince and first princess, Alfred and Margarete, had told them this since they were wee tots.

So, the twins decided to spend their free time "adventuring," instead of playing. They were going to the dangerous place their mother warned them not to visit.

They'd decided to sneak into the room of the evil witch herself.

After what felt like years climbing the tower's spiral stairs, the twins reached the top and found what they were looking for.

"Ah! There it is!"

"This is it...?"

Before them stood a large, weathered door. They pushed against it, and it responded by slowly swinging open.

"Huh...? This is just a regular old room."

"You're right."

Peeking in, the twins saw an ordinary space, far different from the witch's home they'd expected.

Inside was a large canopy bed that could probably have fit ten children their size, a mirror decorated with gold, silver, and all sorts of beautiful stones, silver-lined furniture, and a jewelry box resting atop a bedside table.

This was all tremendously normal to the twins, who were Duchy royalty. As such, it looked like nothing but a boring, ordinary bedchamber to them. The twins had expected the room of a vile witch, like they'd heard about in fairy tales. This was a tremendous disappointment.

"Aw. Boooring."

The twins sat on the bed. It was so soft that they felt as though they were sinking into it.

What a dull turn of events this was. They'd gone through all the trouble of sneaking past the minister and general, and for what? Nothing. In an attempt to recover from the disappointment, Margarete opened the jewelry box on the bedside table.

"Aaaaaah!"

Cold air blasted out of the box. The young girl screamed and pulled her hands back.

"What is it?! What happened?!"

Seeing Margarete flustered led Alfred to believe that she might have found something interesting. He looked over at the open jewelry box.

It appeared to be an ordinary jewelry box at first glance, but there were no jewels within. Instead, there was a silver spoon and a single glass bottle filled with some kind of strange yellow substance.

The twins' eyes glistened with expectation.

"It's full of medicine."

"The witch's medicine."

"What should we do?"

"Mm... I don't know."

The pair looked at each other, trying to puzzle their way out of the

unexpected situation. They'd worked up the courage to invade the witch's territory, but they had no plan for after they arrived.

After a moment of silence, Alfred piped up. "Let's try drinking it."

Since the young prince would eventually inherit his father's throne, he had to show his courage. That was precisely why he grabbed the silver spoon and the bottle full of the bright, mysterious yellow substance.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Margarete, concerned.

"Yeah! Probably."

Replying in the most flippant way possible, Alfred broke the bottle's seal and plunged the spoon inside.

A chunk of hardened "witch's medicine" jiggled atop the spoon as he raised it. Alfred gulped, a nervous expression on his face, and then put the medicine into his mouth.

"What the...?! It's sweet! Super sweet!"

Against all odds, the witch's medicine was overwhelmingly sugary. As far as Alfred could tell, it was made of milk and eggs.

The medicine's flavor spread across the prince's mouth and melted away into his stomach.

The sensation caused him to plunge the spoon back into the bottle and immediately grab another mouthful of the substance. Before he could do so, however, he felt a tug at his sleeve.

"Brother, let me try it!"

Margarete could probably tell that she'd just watched him eat something delicious.

"Oh... Yeah. Sure."

After doing battle with himself for a moment, Alfred passed his sister the spoonful of witch's medicine.

Like her older brother, Margarete opened her eyes wide in delighted shock, a massive smile on her face.

“What is this stuff?! It’s so tasty!”

Her reaction made Alfred happy.

He was just about to finish off the medicine when a voice behind them froze the twins in place.

“Excuse me. What are you two doing?”

This was a witch’s home, so of course an actual witch would be present. Realizing this, the twins turned fearfully to look at the person who had caught them red-handed. That was when they made a discovery.

“Auntie?!”

“Why are you here, Auntie?!”

Standing before them was no scary witch but the silver-haired auntie who the twins’ father frequently said was special to him. The twins’ responses were appropriately high-pitched and childish.

The Duchy’s former first princess, Victoria, sighed loudly.

“This is my room. Why wouldn’t I be here?” she answered, putting the situation together in her head.

Victoria’s younger brother, the twins’ father, loved her as a precious member of the family. However, his wife’s feelings were another matter.

The twins’ mother, who belonged to a noble family connected to the royal bloodline, loathed Victoria.

As far as the former first princess could tell, her brother’s wife saw her as a nuisance. Victoria never meddled in political affairs, but she was nonetheless beloved by her brother. It certainly didn’t help that Victoria was a half-elf, a race the Duchy’s citizens had despised throughout its existence.

The royal family had ruled the Duchy for years, starting with the Crooked King, who was the legitimate son of the last king of the Ancient Kingdom.

When the Crooked King was still young, and referred to by his real name, he entrusted the Duchy to his son, the crown prince. At the time, the land was an

important source of grain for the Ancient Kingdom and a point of trade with the Western Continent.

Although the crown prince would eventually inherit the Ancient Kingdom, his rank fell temporarily. There was nothing strange about this. It was a practice passed down within the Ancient Kingdom for years. The prince would learn politics and leadership while governing an extremely important part of the country, preparing himself for the day when he would rule the Ancient Kingdom itself.

The only problem was that nothing about this arrangement ended up being temporary.

The Crooked King was a half-elf changeling. Due to his life span and inability to age, he was quite different from the humans surrounding him. His reign lasted several hundred years. During this time, the Ancient Kingdom experienced great prosperity.

However, the Crooked King's son, the crown prince, was just a human. There was no way he could live for centuries.

So, when the Crooked King's life was finally ending, the crown prince—who had come to be known as the “first generation prince”—had long since passed on. The fifth generation of his family now governed his land, so the man in line to become the Ancient Kingdom's ruler was, in fact, a complete stranger to the Crooked King.

It would have been one thing if that man was the king's grandson or great-grandson. But he was just an ordinary human who had little in common with the Crooked King. How could the king possibly hand over the Ancient Kingdom, which he'd spent hundreds of years bringing to greatness, to a stranger?

With those thoughts running through his head, and his time in this world coming to an end, the Crooked King lost his mind.

He at last used the forbidden magic the elves of old had locked away. Alongside the palace mages, who could access the ruins the old elves left behind—as well as his trusted half-elf minister and general, who had helped him govern the land for over a hundred years—the Crooked King dirtied his hands with magic that allowed one to abandon their mortal form and live

eternally as a spirit.

He made this choice so that the Ancient Kingdom's prosperity could last forever. However, he and the others never stopped to consider why the elves had forbidden such magic.

Thus, the Ancient Kingdom's capital—once said to have a thousand years of greatness ahead—was overrun with liches, turning the land into a nation of the dead. The Ancient Kingdom split into numerous smaller kingdoms, causing an era of war and strife.

Hundreds of years had passed since then. Half-elves were now unwanted and were strictly forbidden from having any say in the government.

This was true even in the case of the Duchy's princess. Perhaps it was especially true of her, since the Duchy had already been betrayed once by half-elf royalty. Thus, Victoria was not permitted to stand in her country's spotlight, nor did she have any desire to.

She lived in the castle but distanced herself from the royal family, holing up in her room on the building's edge.

"But why are you here, Auntie?"

"Are you the witch?"

The children feared little as they questioned Victoria.

"That's right." Victoria nodded, smiling. "I'm a mage... a witch."

Victoria looked at the pudding the twins had eaten and was struck with an idea.

"Come back here during the day tomorrow. I'll show you some *real* witch magic."

Tomorrow was the Day of Satur. Victoria decided that it wouldn't be a problem if she doted on her niece and nephew a bit.

The next day, bells echoed through the corner of the Duchy's castle.

"This is another world..."

"Amazing!"

The twins looked around. It was their first time visiting the restaurant. The room was bright, despite being a basement of sorts, and full of all manner of decorations and trinkets they'd never seen before.

Just as their aunt had described, people from all over the world were present. Monster folk, such as lizardmen and lamia, quietly ate the food they'd ordered.

The room they'd passed through to get to the restaurant—the "true" witch's room—was filled with all kinds of strange magical tools and books, along with a plethora of witch-like medicines. It was mysterious, but *this* room was even more bizarre.

As Victoria sat the curious twins down at a table, Aletta appeared.

"Welcome! Can I take your order?"

Since Victoria was with the twins today, she would have a normal meal and pudding, rather than pudding to go. "I'd like carbonara and regular pudding, please."

Victoria then ordered a meal she'd only heard named by Altorius, her master. "If I remember correctly, you have a special 'kid's lunch' for children under twelve years old, don't you?"

"Huh? The kid's lunch?" Aletta repeated the order back. This was her first time hearing it mentioned aloud. Now that she thought back, not many of the restaurant's customers were children, especially not kids under twelve.

Victoria had expected Aletta's reaction. She repeated her order calmly. "Exactly. I'd like two for the little ones here."

"Understood." Aletta nodded. "That'll be right out."

She returned to the kitchen to confirm the order.

A little while later, the demon waitress quietly placed the lunch sets in front of the twins.

“Sorry for the wait! Here’s your carbonara and kid’s lunches.”

Confronted with the steaming-hot kid’s lunches before them, the children made eye contact. The dishes were extremely mysterious compared to the meals they were familiar with.

“This is so weird.”

“Yeah, but it looks tasty.”

The lunch sets’ aroma made them gulp loudly despite their confusion. Various foods sat atop the strange plates, which had distinct, cornered sections.

The twins saw some kind of round, cooked meat with dark red sauce on top. There was also some kind of small white flag with a red circle in the center, sitting on a layer of lightly cooked yellow egg, which in turn sat on a bed of the orange rice that the Western Continent was known for.

The plates also contained some sort of weird, light-brown sticks slathered with whitish sauce. The twins could tell that these had shripe-like red tails, but they were still strange.

There was also some kind of round, white ball sitting on a bright green leaf. Little specks of color dotted the sphere’s surface. Thinly cut fried cobbler’s tubers sat next to a small container of red sauce.

Last but not least, glass bottles full of the yellow stuff their aunt had recently taught them about stood beside the plates.

“Ah! This is pudding! There’s pudding!”

“You’re right!”

The twins were full of glee. They went for the pudding first, but Victoria stopped them gently.

“Nope. You have to save the pudding for last.”

Her words were far from mean or loud, but their strength made them impossible to ignore. The twins simply obeyed. There was no reason for disappointment. Everything in the kid’s lunch was positively delicious.

Alfred tried the piece of meat nearest to the center of the dish first. He picked

up the small silver fork and knife next to the plate and cut into the meat.

“Wow! It’s so soft.”

The meat was more tender than he expected. His fork easily cut through it.

As soon as Alfred brought the meat close to his mouth, he smelled its rich aroma and the scent of the sauce atop it.

The young prince’s stomach rumbled.

He gulped and put the piece of meat into his mouth. It spilled juices and fat as he chewed. The dark red sauce and the oranie mixed into the meat, producing a complex, savory flavor that Alfred found instantly delicious.

Although still young, the prince had experienced all manner of luxuries—the Duchy offered fine meals—yet the flavor of the kid’s lunch made Alfred believe that he hadn’t truly known what deliciousness was until that very moment. He focused on eating the food in front of him, losing complete awareness of his surroundings.

Margarette tried the mysterious dish with a red tail first.

What is this?

Living in the Duchy’s capital, removed from the ocean, Margarette had never seen anything like the food in front of her. Tilting her head at the strange object, she cut off a small piece with her knife and then brought it closer with her fork.

Wow. It’s so pretty.

A layer of transparent white, mixed with a dash of pink, peeked out where she’d cut the strange food. Its tremendous beauty took Margarette’s breath away.

Her aunt had instructed her to eat the other foods on the plate before the pudding. Seeing the red-tailed dish up close, Margarette felt herself getting excited. Her cheeks lit up immediately when she tossed the odd food into her mouth.

The strange food was, in fact, an ocean creature. It had a slight seafood aroma but an altogether different mouthfeel from fish.

It wasn't entirely rare to find fish or shellfish on the Duchy palace's dinner table, thanks to preservation magic that prevented rotting. That said, shripe—which Margarete was currently indulging in—was especially quick to rot. Furthermore, it was said to be a food of the common folk. As such, it wasn't served to royalty.

The savory shripe's flavor was entirely new to Margarete, which explained why it gripped her heart so quickly.

Yup! This is super tasty!

The dish's mixed flavors—the crunchy outer layer, the soft shripe meat, and the eggy, slightly sour white sauce—mixed in Margarete's mouth, dancing across her tongue.

The reluctance the twins had felt vanished into thin air as they dug into their kid's lunches.

The main attractions—the meat and seafood—were delicious, but the rest of the food on the kid's lunch plate was nothing to scoff at, either. The white, ball-like side dish and the egg-topped orange rice were both delicious in their own ways.

In the Duchy, frying the Empire's famous cobbler's tubers in oil was uncommon. However, these particular cobbler's tubers were a treat all their own. They were clearly fried in high-quality oil, and their crunchy surface and soft white insides fell apart gently in the mouth.

Salt was an adequate seasoning, but the sour red sauce made them even more delicious.

The flag-topped rice used that same red sauce. The dish, which included chicken meat fried with some kind of yellow vegetable, lacked sourness and was instead surrounded by a buttery aroma. The rice on its own would have been very appetizing, but the addition of the soft egg's flavor turned the mixture into a perfect side dish.

Last but not least, pieces of orange karoot, green beans, and some sort of yellow vegetable were mixed into the white ball sitting atop the green vegetables. They created a stunning pattern on the ball's surface.

As they ate, the twins discovered that the ball was actually made of cobbler's tubers. They'd been pre-mashed, soured a bit, and mixed with the sauce that topped the shripe. The end result was a little acidic but had a smooth texture. The karoot and beans mixed in weren't particularly tasty, but the rest of the dish was more than delicious enough to make up for that.

Although the twins' eyes had initially been drawn to their pudding, they soon changed their tune, instead wanting to try everything on their plates. Their hands and mouths moved as fast as their bodies allowed. Rather than obeying the usual rules and manners of dining, they dug in with big, messy smiles.

Victoria grinned as she enjoyed her noodle dish, which tasted of milk and eggs. Her beloved little brother's blood flowed through the veins of her niece and nephew.

If I had children, would it be like this?

Being humans, the twins would eventually grow up and most likely pass on to the next world before Victoria.

With that lonely thought running through her mind, she watched over the pair warmly, like a mother, as they enjoyed their pudding.

"Auntie, that was super tasty!"

"Thanks for taking us here!"

The twins finished their satisfying meal. Then, noticing that their faces were a mess, they panicked, cleaning themselves with the white cloths at the table.

"Of course." Victoria replied, smiling. The twins were doing their best to stand properly. "Remember, you're my precious family."

"And, um, um..."

"Could you take us again someday?"

Victoria realized that today's meal at the Restaurant to Another World had been even more delicious than usual because she'd eaten with her niece and

nephew. For this reason, her answer was already set in stone.

“Absolutely. I’d be happy to have the company!”

The words left Victoria’s mouth effortlessly, putting huge smiles on the twins’ faces.

Chapter 69:

Oyakodon Hachirou was a performer born and raised in the Mountain Nation. He traveled to towns and villages throughout the land, performing for crowds.

Just after sunrise, he looked at his map, carefully navigating his way along the still-dark mountain path.

The Mountain Nation's roads were dangerous even to experienced travelers, especially the thin paths that covered the mountainside. One wrong step could drop you headfirst to the bottom of a ravine. The forests surrounding the mountains contained a host of dangerous beasts and monsters that attacked anyone who came near their territory.

Furthermore, criminal troublemakers banished from their villages made their new homes in the woods, away from the watchful eye of the law. They became bandits, attacking innocents for their goods. And travelers who died on the mountain ended up cursing the world, causing themselves to be reborn as undead beings that killed humans.

The mountain paths connect to the land of the dead.

At least, those were the words passed down in the Mountain Nation.

I wonder if Mom and Pop are doing okay...

Hachirou had decided to visit his parents. Despite the perilous path and his sweat-covered body, he had a bright smile on his face. It was that kind of day. Spring had just ended, and summer was starting.

By the time Hachirou arrived at his destination, it was much brighter out.

"I'm finally here."

He stood before a sight he'd come to love—a wooden door with an illustration of a cat.

Hachirou wiped away the sweat he'd shed on his journey, checked that the sun was just overhead, and turned the doorknob.

The door opened as the sound of bells rang out, and Hachirou stepped through.

Huh? Mom and Pop ain't here yet, I guess.

Hachirou looked around the restaurant. The usual, strange guests were present. However, he didn't see the pair he was hoping for.

What if... he worried. No. There's no way.

Before they'd last parted ways, he'd promised to meet them during the daytime on the summer's first Day of Satur.

In other words, it had been a year since he'd entered one of the doors scattered throughout the nation and seen his parents.

His memories of them from a year ago—older faces and wrinkled skin—had Hachirou concerned. But he did his best to brush that aside.

It's no big deal. They're probably just running late. That must be it.

Hachirou decided to grab some food while he waited. He kept reminding himself that his parents weren't the type to just go and drop dead.

"Welcome to Western Cuisine Nekoya! Is this your first time here?"

Perhaps because he was still standing at the entrance, thinking, a young, blonde demon woman with black horns approached Hachirou. She was dressed in a western-style uniform that brazenly revealed her legs.

Hachirou didn't remember her being at the restaurant when he'd last visited. As far as he could tell, she thought he was a newcomer.

Although initially struck by the woman and her beautiful hair—he never saw anyone like that in the city—he finally replied, "No, actually. I haven't been here in about a year, so I was just a little lost in thought."

Hachirou heard the sound of bells ringing as the front door opened and sensed the new arrivals.

"Whew! Getting old is getting old. Never thought it'd take so long to climb such a tiny mountain."

“You’re quite right... Oh, if it isn’t Hachirou! Did we make you wait long?”

Hachirou’s heart skipped a beat as he heard a pair of familiar voices.

“Mom! Pop!” He reached down and grabbed the two in his arms. The elderly visitors patted their son Hachirou—who was several feet taller than they were—on the head lovingly.

“Now, now! Hold yer horses! Yer much too old for this, ain’t you, my boy?”

“Hachirou will always be our little boy, no matter how old he gets.”

Since he was just one more mouth to feed, Hachirou had already been abandoned in the mountains by the time he could recognize objects around him. Then, as luck had it, a halfling couple who’d already seen their children leave the nest had found him.

As a child, Hachirou knew only the village he was born in and little else. From the halflings, he learned how to survive the harsh mountains and protect himself, as well as various arts that he could use to make a living. He traveled with the couple for ten years.

After a decade had passed, and Hachirou had grown into a capable young man, he parted ways with Mom and Pop, as all halflings did when they came of age. The couple returned to their life of peaceful travel.

“Come now, it’s about time you put us down!”

“Right, right! We’re quite famished, you see. We didn’t eat anything this morning.”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.”

Hachirou snapped to his senses. Slightly embarrassed, he set the two down.

“Hey, young lady. You’re the waitress here, right? Take us to our table!”

“We’re starvin’, so grab us a menu as soon as you can, lass.”

The waitress chuckled at their demands. “Right this way!”

She did little to hide her smile as she led the couple and their son to an open table.

“I’ll bring your menus out in just a moment.”

“Ah, sorry—hold on a second.”

Hachirou stopped the waitress before she could go back to grab menus.

“Hmm? What can I help you with?”

“We’re actually ready to order.”

His parents nodded.

The Restaurant to Another World was full of all sorts of delicious food, and although Mom and Pop were old, they could eat a lot. But they started every meal at the restaurant with something specific.

“Could we get three orders of oyakodon? If you could bring them out ASAP, that’d be wonderful.”

Oyakodon was the elderly halflings’ favorite dish and a meal that meant so much to Hachirou himself.

After ordering, the trio shared stories and memories they’d accumulated throughout the year.

“You went all the way to the Sand Nation?!” Hachirou asked.

The pair answered confidently.

“Yup! It was mighty hot over there, let me tell ya.”

“We’ve been there several times, but yowza—it’s as full of sand as ever!”

Halflings devoted their entire lives to travel, so it wasn’t particularly rare to meet those who’d seen every country on the continent. The two elderly halflings sitting in front of Hachirou were such travelers. That was what made their stories so interesting—they’d seen and experienced so much of the world.

“But ya know, we met a pretty surprising group—halflings who’d crossed the sea!”

“That we did! We ran into a couple of young halflings who’d crossed the ocean by boat. They told us all about how boring it was. They never wanted to

do it again!”

“Wow!” Hachirou replied. “Well, the Mountain Nation is the same as ever. Oh! But recently, that ogre couple who lived by the road for so long, and fought back the elimination squad from the city, up and disappeared. The place is much safer these days, or so I hear.”

Hachirou continued to fill his parents in until the master—another face Hachirou hadn’t seen in a year—brought their oyakodon.

“We best eat before it gets cold.”

“Shall we get to eatin’, then?”

Unable to resist any longer, the halflings picked up their chopsticks and took the lids off their bowls.

“Hooh! What a wonderful smell.”

“Truly. No matter how many times I eat oyakodon, the scent always does me in, that it does.”

The pair took big sniffs of their oyakodon before cheerfully digging in. Watching them stuff their faces, Hachirou removed the lid from his own bowl.

He felt his stomach tighten in response to the sweet, salty smell. He gulped, grabbed his chopsticks, and looked at the meal in front of him.

The otherworldly dish known as “oyakodon,” which consisted of a bowl of white rice topped with chicken meat and egg, was luxurious beyond words.

God, I love this stuff.

The colorful layer of egg was reflected in Hachirou’s eyes. He took a moment to enjoy the dish’s aesthetic beauty, as well as its rich scent. He even enjoyed the bowl’s weight in the palms of his hands.

All that was left was to dig in.

Gently, Hachirou broke his chopsticks in two and prepared to take his first bite.

Between his chopsticks, he grasped a large piece of chicken—fatty, with its skin still attached. Wrapped in soft, cooked egg, it sat atop rice that had

absorbed its brown juices.

The colorful green and white scallions caught Hachirou's eye, as if beckoning him to hurry up.

He stuffed the oyakodon into his mouth.

Aaah...

The moment he closed his lips, the hot oyakodon came apart. Its complex, hearty flavor spread across his tongue. The rich chicken skin and savory, tender meat combined with the onions' crunchy mouthfeel, the sweetness of the rice, and the sweet and sour sauce, thoroughly engaging and entertaining Hachirou's taste buds.

This is dang delicious.

Hachirou teared up as he chewed his meal.

He thought back to being abandoned by his birth parents, remembering how lucky he was that Mom and Pop had picked him up. They'd been depressed by his situation, so they'd taken him by the hand and led him through the doorway.

Then, together as a family for the first time, the three had eaten the oyakodon the previous master had made in his mysterious little restaurant.

Hachirou remembered how the meal's amazing flavor had been enough to make him forget his despair. The halfling couple had watched Hachirou dig furiously into his meal.

"Ya see, this here dish is called 'oyakodon.' In the master's world, 'oya' means 'parent,' and 'ko' means 'child.' So, the parent and child are eaten together."

"We've been thinkin'... Since we're here, sittin' and eatin' oyakodon together, ain't we already like family?"

Their kind words had pierced Hachirou's broken heart, and the world he'd once seen in shades of gray suddenly regained its color.

On that day, the two halflings in front of him became his true parents.

After enjoying his first bite of oyakodon at his own pace, Hachirou felt his

stomach start to growl.

It was pressuring him for more, and he knew he wouldn't be able to resist its call.

Aw, crap. No more holding back.

Placing the bowl directly to his lips, Hachirou shoveled oyakodon into his mouth, just as his parents were doing. Occasionally, he reached for the miso soup that came with the meal or cleansed his palette with the sour pickled radishes on the side. But his hands never stopped moving.

The three of them finished eating at nearly the exact same time.

“Whew! Now, that was some good eatin’.”

“Plate number one's finished, yes it is!”

“What next?”

Hachirou's parents placed their chopsticks down, satisfied, and reached for the menu as if it were the most natural thing to do.

Of course, Hachirou joined them. Peering at the menu, he pondered what to order next.

The halflings were getting old, but they could still put away food, and so could Hachirou. One bowl of oyakodon would never be enough to satisfy any of them.

“How's about...”

“And then...”

Although their stomachs might have been bottomless, their wallets were not.

The happy family thought carefully about what to order next as they leisurely enjoyed their time together.

Chapter 70:

Ice Cream On Saturday morning, the master printed a piece of paper from his computer and put it on the wall.

“There we go. I hope that’s right.”

He couldn’t read the text on the paper at all, so he was worried about whether it was correct. It looked like some kind of bizarre code, as far as he was concerned.

The paper was a notice that a pointy-eared regular had written for him a few years back. Although a lot of time had passed since then, that customer hadn’t aged a bit.

The notice was Nekoya’s otherworldly announcement of the beginning of summer.

The master went over the text once more in his head, making himself nervous all over again. Otherworldly script was the one thing he just couldn’t read at all.

No, the text should be right. The name on the file was definitely correct.

The master was fairly certain that the text on the notice he’d put up the previous year had a similar pattern. He couldn’t be sure, however, and that made him anxious.

The bells at the entrance rang, announcing Aletta’s arrival.

“Good morning, Master!”

“Yo! Top of the morning.”

After exchanging greetings with the master, Aletta saw the notice he’d just put up.

“Um, is that something we’ll start doing today?” She tilted her head. “What does it say?”

Aletta couldn’t read. She was aware that whenever the master put up signs or notices with pretty writing, they announced a new dish or special seasonal event. However, she didn’t know the particulars.

“Oh, this? It says...” The master thought it over yet again. *It’s probably right. It must be!*

He briefly explained that the text on the notice continued a tradition from when his grandfather had run things.

It was past noon when sweet-seekers began dropping into the restaurant.

“New ice cream flavors...?”

Celestine Fragan, a high priestess who served the Lord of Light, was one of Nekoya’s biggest sweet-lovers. She noticed the sign on the wall immediately. It was clearly handwritten by someone highly educated, with extremely beautiful penmanship.

Celestine’s three disciples chimed in, responding to her words. The four had bonded tightly over their love of sweets.

“Ice cream’s that stuff that melts really easily, right?”

“Correct. It’s a dessert made from milk. It’s quite soft and cold, apparently.”

“It goes really well with pound cake.”

Celestine nodded at her disciples’ answers. “True. I do recall the two pairing quite well.”

The demon girl had just brought the group their menus. Celestine called Aletta over and, on behalf of her party of four, asked the waitress about the sign.

“Excuse me. I have a question about that notice over there.”

“Of course.” With a big smile, Aletta explained what the master had told her earlier.

Apparently, every summer, instead of serving the usual strawberry, chocolate, and vanilla ice cream, Nekoya added flavors to the menu. Folks walking around outside in the heat typically wanted something nice and cold at that time of year. Thus, Nekoya received more requests for ice cream during summer than usual.

Aletta had only just started working at Nekoya last summer, so she hadn't paid any mind to customers' ordering patterns. Still, she recalled there being more orders for cold sweets than normal during this time of year.

"So, these are the ice cream flavors we added today," Aletta said, showing Celestine's group the menu the master had provided. Additional flavors were scrawled on the transparent sheet, which had been in use long before Aletta joined the team.

"My! There certainly are quite a few. Huh...?!"

Seeing a particular flavor on the menu, Celestine immediately raised her voice.

"Excuse me, is the 'rum raisin' written here correct?!"

Among the menu's many added flavors, Celestine had indeed found her most beloved.

"Yes! All of these are ice cream flavors."

"In that case, I'll have a pound cake tea set and a rum raisin ice cream, please."

Celestine couldn't help but smile as she requested the ice cream along with her usual order.

Each of Celestine's disciples followed suit, ordering the ice cream flavor that best suited their tastes.

"Me, too!"

"I'll have the pound cake tea set with strawberry yogurt ice cream!"

"And I'll have the pound cake tea set with chocolate chip ice cream. Thank you."

"Thanks for your orders! Those'll be right out," Aletta said, retreating to the kitchen.

"Sorry for the wait! I brought your ice cream first. Your pound cake tea sets will be out shortly."

Aletta made sure to place each of the four small plates of ice cream in front of the disciple who'd ordered them.

The round ice cream sitting before Celestine contained bits of dried grape. Faced with the dessert, Celestine gulped.

"My, my. This is just..."

Based on her past experiences, Celestine knew that ice cream was made by freezing milk. That wasn't the entire process, of course. Simply freezing milk would create something similar to Nekoya's ice cream, but not exactly the same.

Faced with the rum raisin ice cream, however, Celestine was now immensely curious. Expectations high, she grabbed her silver spoon and plunged it into the round mass.

Scooping out a mouthful of ice cream, she brought it to her lips and took a taste.

Ah! It's so cold and delicious.

The ice cream was full of rich rum raisin flavor. The slightly bitter alcohol and extremely sweet raisins exploded inside Celestine's mouth.

The ice cream was cold, like winter. Her tongue's warmth melted it away, leaving behind chilly sweetness.

It felt wonderful.

While Celestine appreciated her cold, sugary rum raisin ice cream, her disciples enjoyed their own orders.

"This is great! The combination of strawberries and sweet and sour yogurt is just spectacular."

"This chocolate stuff is truly to die for. Although I suppose that if the Alfade Company doesn't even know about it, it's probably not available on our side, huh?"

"Yeah, this is the stuff." Like Celestine, the alcohol-loving Carlotta had ordered rum raisin ice cream. She was thoroughly enjoying the liquor-soaked grapes. "I just can't get enough of sweets that taste alcoholic."

I heard that out west there's a drink made by soaking fruit in dwarf whiskey.

Carlotta recalled a story she'd been told by a merchant who also followed the Lord of Light. Apparently, some ten years ago, western dwarves had started using fruit to make booze on their island.

They didn't ferment the fruit juices—they actually transferred the flavors by putting whole fruits inside the whiskey. According to the merchant, the liquor was sugary, cloying, and easy to drink. As an added bonus, the fruit in the alcohol lasted a good long while and was tasty in a way that regular fruits weren't. The merchant said that those fruits were far more expensive than average.

It actually wouldn't surprise me if that liquor was the work of a dwarf reproducing something they found here.

Carlotta knew of dwarves who copied the alcohol they found at Nekoya, so that wasn't out of the question.

The monastery was actually attempting to reproduce the flavor of rum raisin—Celestine's favorite flavor—by testing dried grapes in various types of alcohol.

Carlotta's thoughts bounced around as she enjoyed the sweet ice cream.

Licking strawberry yogurt ice cream off her spoon, Anna concluded that she'd made the right choice.

"Yeah. You just can't have the sweet flavor without the sour to make it stand out."

She much preferred tangy desserts over purely sweet things. That was why she adored all sorts of yogurt and why she'd picked strawberry yogurt ice cream.

Yogurt existed in Anna's world. It was made by fermenting cow's milk, so yogurt and cheese could be found in villages that kept cows.

The ice cream Anna was eating during this visit to Nekoya had been made with white yogurt. Strawberry syrup formed a pretty stripe pattern across it. While the dish was certainly sweet, it tasted acidic as well.

The cold sweet and sour flavor melted in Anna's mouth, leaving a refreshing aftertaste.

In Anna's world, people either ate yogurt on its own or sweetened it a bit. There was nothing like the complex yogurts Nekoya offered. The new experience excited her.

I have to figure out how to make yogurt like this!

Anna felt that it would be truly special if her world could reproduce these kinds of treats.

"Chocolate is just on a completely different level," Julianne said as the slightly bitter chocolate chip ice cream melted in her mouth.

The dish combined small chocolate pieces with normal vanilla ice cream made of high-quality milk. The combination melted away, leaving only a sweet sensation behind.

I'd prefer it a tad sweeter, if anything. Still, it's incredibly complex!

The flavor made Julianne's cheeks puff out. Compared to the desserts she'd grown used to eating while she lived as a noble, this ice cream—no, this otherworldly confection—lacked a bit of sweetness.

Aside from its sweetness, however, the complex taste produced by the ice cream's different flavors would be impossible to find anywhere but Nekoya.

But... Hmm... I wonder if there's a way for us to produce this chocolate stuff on our side?

The bittersweet confection known as "chocolate" was Julianne's favorite ice cream flavors. Unfortunately, in her world, Julianne couldn't even get her hands on its ingredients.

Of course, it went without saying that—in an earnest effort to help Celestine—Julianne had followed up with some of her old contacts and asked the Alfade Company about the recipe. Still, she'd come up empty-handed.

Lady Katalina said that chocolate was probably made from kalao beans, but...

The Alfade Company seemed completely unaware of the existence of kalao beans.

There was one dignified-looking guest at Nekoya whom Julianne had seen before. As far as she could tell, they were likely a high priest of the Lord of Light. She thought it might be worth asking them if they knew anything. With that thought running through her head, she continued indulging in her chocolate chip ice cream.

Just as the four finished their ice cream, Aletta appeared with their cake and black tea sets in hand.

“Sorry for the wait. Here are your pound cake sets.”

“My! Thank you very much.”

Celestine found herself smiling as she took the tea from the waitress. Although the ice cream was delicious, it had made her mouth cold. Hot tea was the perfect thing to warm her up.

Furthermore, all that sweet ice cream had dulled her tongue. The black tea helped to restore her sense of taste.

“Whew...”

Celestine let out a satisfied sigh.

Everyone else in the group had their own way of enjoying their tea, but they were warming their tongues up, too.

“Now then,” she asked, “shall we enjoy today’s pound cake?”

“Yeah!”

“But of course.”

“A wonderful idea.”

Celestine’s three disciples responded positively, and their tea party began in earnest.

Chapter 71:

Tuna Mayo Corn Bread It was still early in the morning and a bit cold out.

Shota slowly pushed the handcart with “Bakery Kimura” written on its side through the alley.

Oof... It's chilly.

The temperature had dropped quite a bit recently, and all signs of summer were completely gone. Shota's body trembled in the cold as he pushed the bread-filled cart, his feet light.

His destination was Western Cuisine Nekoya, a restaurant in the area.

Even before Shota's father was born, Bakery Kimura had had a long working relationship with Nekoya, their biggest customer. The restaurant bought large quantities of butter rolls and crustless sandwich bread pretty much every day.

I wonder if she's there today...

Once Shota finally made the jump to junior high, he'd at last begun his formal training as a baker. Delivering orders to Nekoya was part of that process. Up until last year, it was little more than a pain in the butt.

Nowadays, however, Shota found himself looking forward to Saturday deliveries.

It took about three minutes for Shota and his handcart to reach the back entrance of the building. As always, Shota pressed the button for the large transport elevator.

He waited for it to arrive. As soon as its doors opened, he plunged in with the handcart, heading straight for the first-floor basement.

Arriving in Nekoya's familiar kitchen, Shota could hear and smell beef stew cooking. Once he realized nobody was in the kitchen, he was ever so slightly relieved.

“Excuse meeee! I'm here from Bakery Kimura! I have your bread!” Shota

yelled, announcing his arrival clearly and concisely.

It didn't take Aletta long to appear from the dining area. She was probably in the middle of her morning cleaning.

"Good morning, Shota!"

Shota trembled in surprise at the smile Aletta flashed as she greeted him. He did his best to hide his blushing face.

"Y-yo. Um, I brought the bread. Could you take it?"

"Of course! Could you help me put it in here?"

Aletta stood next to him so that she could carry the bread.

Shota's nose picked up the scent of soap from Aletta's beautiful golden hair, making him gulp. As always, she wore her black hair accessories as well.

Aletta's Japanese was good, but judging by her name, she was likely a foreigner. For some reason, Shota had only ever seen her working on Saturdays since she was hired last year, even though Nekoya technically wasn't open on Saturdays.

Thanks to Aletta, Shota had begun to enjoy helping out with the family business on Saturdays—and Saturdays alone.

Crap! Work. This is work.

Staring at Aletta while she put the bread loaves onto racks, Shota finally snapped to his senses and began to help her. They needed to put away a lot of bread, since Nekoya offered free refills on bread and rice. With two of them working, however, it didn't take long to finish.

"I really appreciate the help."

At Aletta's almost-apologetic tone, Shota panicked, waving his hands back and forth. "I-It's no big deal! Not at all!"

Clearing his throat, he attempted to complete his other goal for the day.

"U-um, so... Here."

Now that Shota thought about it, this was his first time ever giving a woman a present. Well, other than his mother.

He was a little nervous, but he managed to hand Aletta the bag he'd loaded onto the cart.

Aletta wore a somewhat puzzled expression, since she had little experience receiving gifts.

The bag was warm to the touch. Aletta assumed that it contained some kind of bread, judging by the aroma coming out.

"Oh! Is this...bread?"

"Yeah. Um, tuna mayo corn bread," Shota replied, his cheeks red.

"Tuna mayo corn bread?"

"Yeah."

Shota worked up every last ounce of courage he had to hold his head high and reply to the puzzled girl in front of him.

"This morning, the old man finally told me, 'This is good enough to sell.' So, I wanted to give you some."

Bakery Kimura primarily sold filled and stuffed breads to office workers and students. Every day, they made large quantities of staples like chocolate cornets, curry bread, all manner of sandwiches, and of course, tuna mayo corn bread. The latter, in particular, was considered a staple among staples.

It took a lot of training to get the bread's quality to an acceptable level. Shota was objectively better at baking bread than the average person. But even so, it took countless attempts before his father was finally satisfied with his work.

At last, Shota had lived up to his father's high standards and made bread good enough to sell at the bakery. His father had given him permission to bake the shop's daily batch of tuna mayo corn bread on his own.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Shota nodded at Aletta's question. "I figured, if I'm gonna have anyone eat my baking, I'd want someone like you, Aletta... Er, never mind."

He nearly let the cat out of the bag but managed to catch himself before it was too late.

“Well, I gotta go help the ’rents out, so I’ll be on my way!”

Shota grabbed his cart, dashing into the elevator as though fleeing the scene of a crime.

Aletta stood in the kitchen, bag in hand, just as confused as she had been moments ago.

“Um... What should I do?”

In the end, she decided to talk to the master about it. The master chuckled after hearing the details.

“Whoa. Shota from Kimura’s place, eh?”

Nekoya’s relationship with Bakery Kimura went back a long, long time.

The restaurant had started selling bread from the bakery well before the master was even born. In fact, when he was a student, he’d regularly dropped by the bakery for bread.

He’d even known Shota, who’d just entered high school, since the young baker was a baby. Shota was next in line to take over the family business.

They go and grow into adults before you know it.

“Well, if Shota’s pop said that tuna mayo corn bread is good enough to sell, it must be pretty dang tasty,” the master mused as he prepared the corn potage he’d cooked earlier that morning.

“You should dig in before it gets cold,” he added. “Tuna mayo corn bread’s still good at room temperature, but it’s especially delicious fresh out of the oven.”

The master would know. When he was younger, he’d indulged in more than his fair share of tuna mayo corn bread.

Aletta’s breakfast that day was a fresh vegetable salad, corn potage, and the tuna mayo corn bread Shota had given her.

“Let’s dig in.”

“Okay!” Sitting across from the master, Aletta said grace. “Thank you, oh god

of demons, for this, my daily bread. I offer you my gratitude.”

She began to eat.

What bizarre bread... It is bread, right?

In the bag decorated with otherworldly script were two pieces of bread.

They were both exactly the same, as far as Aletta could tell. Their aroma tickled her nose.

She inspected one piece, picking it apart with the knowledge she'd gained during the last year.

Hmm. If I remember correctly, “tuna mayo” is tuna fish mixed with mayonnaise, and corn is a type of grain.

The light brown loaf was about the size of a person's fist. The various ingredients in its center included oily tuna mixed with mayo and yellow specks of corn.

They rested atop the bread's crust and had a positively enticing aroma.

Aletta gulped as she held the bread in her hands. It was still warm. Clearly, not much time had passed since it left the oven.

Bringing the tuna mayo corn bread to her mouth slowly and taking a bite, she was met with the baked bread's crunchy mouthfeel and the smell and aroma of wheat.

Ah, this is tasty.

The loaf was made of the otherworld's high-quality white bread. There was a soft, slightly sweet center beneath its crunchy surface.

However, this particular bread's true value was in eating it with the ingredients at its center.

The slightly browned tuna mayo on the loaf's surface fused pure, savory tuna and soft, sour mayo.

When the mouthfeel occasionally got crunchy, Aletta momentarily tasted sweetness wrapped in heat, likely from the inclusion of minced raw oranie. Plentiful, almost fruity sweet corn was also mixed into the bread.

All the fillings meshed well with the bread, making Aletta crave more. It didn't take her long to finish the first piece.

"Phew... Ah."

After enjoying the tuna mayo corn bread and sweet corn potage thoroughly, Aletta lowered her hands and noticed the master looking at her. She turned bright red.

For as long as she could remember, she had been poor. She'd struggled for food all her life. So getting tunnel vision when she was eating was a habit she wanted to break.

Despite the fact that she was in front of her boss, Aletta had indulged in the unfamiliar bread completely unselfconsciously.

But all the master could do was think about how charming Aletta was.

He'd known this waitress from the other world for a whole year now.

At first, he'd worried about whether things would work out. Nowadays, however, Aletta was a fundamental part of Saturdays at Nekoya. As far as the master was concerned, she was also a charming young lady and a customer who enjoyed his cooking wholeheartedly.

"Well? Is it good?" he asked. "The bread from Kimura's place is great. One of these days, I'll treat you to some other delicious bread."

The master let the words slip from his mouth casually, watching Aletta.

A mess of breadcrumbs around her mouth, Aletta smiled and nodded.

"I can't wait!"

Chapter 72:

Fruit Jelly

The water was massive, and the breeze smelled mysterious.

Facing a sight she could never have imagined, the elf named Alice—born to two half-elf parents—raised her voice in shock.

“Woow...!”

“It’s been a while since I last saw the sea,” said Fardania, Alice’s guardian. “But, geez, it really is huge.”

Fardania smiled, recalling the first time she’d seen the ocean. It had been about fifty years since she came face-to-face with the sea while traveling with her parents.

“So, we’re finally here, eh?”

Over a year had passed since Fardania left her village.

In that brief time, she’d visited the elf capital, the forest where she’d found Alice, and all sorts of human towns and villages. She’d also fought monsters, nearly been fooled by ill-intentioned humans, and stayed at an inn run by a half-elf for days to figure out the secret of its elf bean soup. For a time, she’d even joined up with adventurers and done various odd jobs as well.

These were all precious experiences to Fardania. She hadn’t had them fifty years ago, when her mother was still alive and her whole family had spent a year traveling by the sea.

And then there was Alice, the elven child Fardania had picked up. To make Alice look like an adventurer of sorts, Fardania had her wear a human mage’s robes, complete with a cloak.

Ironically, there were humans who mistook Alice for Fardania’s older sister. As far as Fardania was concerned, however, Alice had a thirty-year-old elven child’s face. She simply didn’t look like she could withstand the harsh realities of

a long journey.

Of course, Fardania had an objective for this journey. She didn't plan on wasting her time in one place for too long. If her memories were correct, however, this port town was rather desolate, since it was near a battlefield from the old war with the demons. It was the perfect place for some peace and quiet.

Huh. So that's why they brought me here.

Realizing her mother and father's intentions, Fardania chuckled. Alice knew nothing of how the world operated, so this quiet town was the perfect environment for her to learn the ways of the world.

Fardania's parents had likely felt that way as well when they chose to bring eighty-year-old Fardania here.

"Let's be on our way," said Fardania.

"Okay!"

Alice flashed Fardania the childlike smile she'd only recently started showing.

For Alice—who'd lost her beloved mother and father and then gotten lost in the woods—Fardania was both her guardian and her new big sister, whom she loved dearly. Fardania had saved the young girl when she was in danger. Furthermore, she was the most trustworthy person Alice knew, having lived a hundred years longer than Alice. Anything the older elf said was the truth as far as Alice was concerned.

The two elves entered the town, and Fardania found her expectations completely off the mark. The supposedly quiet little seaside community was positively bustling.

"Come one, come all! We got rare cafa, brought from all the way across the ocean! They say even the Empire's great emperor adores this particular product!"

"Any high-quality white sugar? We're getting orders from the Shrine of Light lately, and we wanna stock up."

"What the hell's this price? I get that this whiskey's gourmet and all, but you

could buy five bottles of the Ocean Nation’s amazing plum wine for this much!”

“Ain’t ya heard? This is the dwarves’ new whiskey. Word has it that even the eccentric Aingard was willing to smith a sword after receiving a gift of this stuff!”

“Whoa! It’s sure busy here in the one port the Empire took in battle.”

“Yup. Boats from the Ocean Nation and the Sand Nation have been sailing in and out recently.”

“Hey, young man! If this is your first time in a port town, how ’bout you try one of these fresh fish skewers?!”

“Ayyyooo! Croquettes, fresh off the pan! I change the oil every ten days, so I can guarantee its taste!”

“How about some margo juice? Freshly squeezed!”

People filled the streets—merchants, business owners, suspicious-looking adventurers, travelers, and bag carriers.

And all kinds of stalls.

Everyone was doing their best to sell their goods—the sound of people speaking mixed with the sound of the ocean waves and reverberated through the air.

There was such a large difference between the town in Fardania’s childhood memory and what faced her now that she clutched her head with her hands.

“Can human towns really change this much in fifty years?!”

She’d pictured a quiet, cozy little town and had planned to use this opportunity to look into the “sea herbs” that the other world utilized for flavoring.

However, Fardania looked down at Alice—who was mesmerized by the crowded streets and unfamiliar vista before her—and rethought things. Unlike when she used to travel alone, Fardania now had a child in tow.

I can’t push Alice too hard. This is frustrating, but I have no choice.

With the town this loud and crowded, she wanted to get out immediately.

“Shall we get going, Alice? Alice...?!”

The girl was no longer next to her, where she was supposed to be.

While Fardania had been lost in thought, Alice’s childish sense of curiosity seemingly drove her to wander off on her own.

“Arrgggh, kids! I swear!”

Fardania began to panic. Cursing to herself, she began searching for the girl—not recalling the time when, fifty years ago, she too had gotten lost, and her parents had desperately searched for her all over the place.

Fortunately, it didn’t take long to track Alice down. She was staring at a particular item at one of the many booths.

“Woow...”

Alice was looking at some kind of translucent object atop a sparkly red copper dish. It was filled with sliced fruit, which shone beautifully in the light.

The clear substance was like nothing Alice had ever seen before. It looked like water at first glance, but it jiggled wildly when poked with a spoon.

“There you are! Alice, how many times do I have to tell you not to go wandering off on your own?!”

After scolding Alice, Fardania followed the young girl’s gaze to the object she was so fixated on in the stall.

“What is that?” Fardania asked the vendor. “Some kind of food?”

Fardania was unfamiliar with the strange slime filled with colorful fruit.

“Yup,” the vendor replied in the most precise, carefree manner possible. Their answer was remarkably elf-like, in that sense. “It’s a dessert called ‘fruit jelly,’” they added. “You should give it a try. I sold some to an elf like you not too long ago. They thought it was quite good.”

The Witch of the Cape had told the vendor that, although the fruit jelly was tough and imperfect, it was tasty nonetheless. With that in mind, the vendor felt confident recommending the confection to the two potential customers in

front of the stall.

Fardania and Alice exchanged glances. “Huh.” After considering the fruit jelly for a moment, Fardania placed her order. “Can we get two servings, then?”

“Much obliged.”

Politely handing the girls two wooden bowls of fruit jelly, the vendor laughed internally.

Heh heh! They're gonna be crazy surprised.

The vendor made this special dessert from magic dust they'd learned about from the ageless Witch of the Cape. Their father had told them that the witch already lived on the cape when he was a lad.

Although the fruit jelly looked like a low-level monster's slime, the two elves in front of the vendor agreed that it was delicious.

The moment the elves tasted a spoonful of the jelly, their cheeks puffed out with glee.

“Wow, this isn't half-bad!”

“Yeah! It's super-duper tasty.”



The fruit slices had been boiled in sugar water, mixed with fruit juice, and then hardened with magic dust. Those were the fruit jelly's ingredients.

The way the cool, sweet, and sour fruit juice melted away in the mouth made the jelly a real gem of a product. Other vendors sold it, too.

I wonder where the witch got this recipe, though, the vendor thought as they prepared seconds for the two elves.

All they knew about the witch was that she was tremendously beautiful and that she had lived in this land for many years.

A few years ago, the witch had decided on a whim to teach the vendor how to make fruit jelly.

Since no one knew where the witch was from, it wasn't particularly strange that she knew how to make fruit jelly. What was confusing was why she'd chosen to teach the vendor to make the dish.

If I remember correctly, she said something like, "There's more of them around these days." Eh, who am I to try and figure out how a witch thinks?

There wasn't much point in thinking about something they'd never figure out, so the vendor returned to their work. Regardless of who the witch was, she'd definitely saved their butt. That was all that really mattered.

On the port town's outskirts, a cape faced the ocean. Connected to the basement of a small house built on that cape was a cave where the ocean's water ran deep.

Over sixty years had passed since Camilla moved in.

She often traveled into the depths of the sea, searching for various foods and medicinal ingredients. Today, she once again returned with a bounty in hand.

"I got quite a bit."

This time, Camilla had surfaced with all kinds of seaweed, shellfish, and even the fang of a shark that had the gall to try and attack her. She looked her goods over and smiled to herself.

In this land, far removed from her friends, days like these helped heal the mermaid's loneliness.

Goods in hand, Camilla quickly offered up a prayer to the Lord of Blue.

"Oh Lord of Blue, ruler of the water, please give me your blessing. Grant me legs to walk upon the earth."

The prayer transformed Camilla's mermaid fin into human legs. Her beautiful tail, blessed with the blue of the ocean, morphed—not into clawed, weapon-like dragon legs with metallic blue scales, but rather into smooth human legs.

Those legs were too weak to be considered weapons, but they were perfect for pretending to be a human on land.

Camilla was a mermaid from the blue sea's eternal Great Empire. She had vowed everlasting loyalty to the Lord of Blue and was also a high priestess who'd received a special blessing directly from the emperor—the Lord of Blue himself.

Normally, high priestesses represented the Great Empire's entire population. In other words, their job was to guide their comrades.

However, Camilla's situation was a bit different. Seventy years ago, as the blue sea's most skilled and talented priestess, she'd received a special order directly from the Lord of Blue to travel to the continent in the north. The Lord of Blue told her to monitor the Million Colors of Chaos. Its followers—known on the continent as "demons"—were attempting to revive their lord.

Tens of thousands of years ago, the Ancient Six destroyed the Million Colors of Chaos after it devoured and absorbed countless lives and powerful creatures. Then, becoming the world's rulers, the Ancient Six forged three pacts.

The first was that they must never wage war among themselves.

The second was that they must never become directly involved in battles between followers who received their blessings.

The third and last was that, should the Million Colors of Chaos be reborn, the Ancient Six must come together and defeat the foul being, no matter the cost.

Even after all these years, the Ancient Six never forgot about the beast of chaos they'd barely felled after combining their powers.

Therefore, when the Million Colors of Chaos had once again appeared in the world seventy years ago, the Lord of Blue granted his most powerful servant, Camilla, the blessing of immortality by sharing his blood with her. Then he sent Camilla to investigate what had transpired, and ordered her to monitor the continent to ensure the Chaos wouldn't return.

This felt like a demotion for Camilla, a high priestess of the Lord of Blue, meant to lead the tens of thousands of mermaids living deep within the ocean. She was her tribe's beloved child, and it saddened them tremendously that she would have to live a life of isolation, although it was the Lord of Blue's direct order.

That said, Camilla didn't hate her new life. It allowed her to watch all sorts of things move and change over the years.

Most of her work had actually been completed. The Million Colors of Chaos's followers—known as “demons” on this continent—had successfully summoned their lord back into the world. However, together with three comrades, a hero with the divine blessings of the powerful Lord of Black had managed to fell the beast once more.

Since the Million Colors of Chaos had been revived, only to be destroyed again, its many followers lost the ability to receive their deity's powerful blessings. They'd declined in number, and now the humans ruled the northern lands.

That was the conclusion Camilla had come to after ten years traveling the land with her human legs as a “mage.” (She had no desire to pretend to follow the so-called Water God that the humans worshiped.)

After she informed the Lord of Blue of these events, he ordered Camilla to continue monitoring the land to ensure that demons didn't try to revive the Million Colors of Chaos again.

Camilla moved to a small town near the ocean, building a house connected to

the sea below. She took on the role of a friendly witch who occasionally sold sea medicine to the townsfolk that visited.

By doing so, Camilla was following the Lord of Blue's direct orders, but there was another reason she'd moved to the cape. She'd grown tired of the peaceful, unchanging world of the Lord of Blue's followers in the ocean's depths.

Things had changed quite a bit during the sixty years Camilla had lived in the small port town. The influence of the demons and followers of the Million Colors of Chaos had dwindled so much that large ships now crossed between the two continents, and commerce boomed. The port overflowed with goods and people, slowly growing larger and larger. More people moved to the area, and the once-quiet port town became a bustling little city.

Then the Empire, which had grown massive, invaded the land. The lord pledged allegiance immediately, and the town became the territory of that enormous country. It was the Empire's only port, so the government poured money into its growth, further raising its population by sending in imperial citizens.

Camilla simply watched the fast-moving events unfold from afar, without getting involved.

But five years ago, things had begun to change for the mermaid priestess.

"Now, then. I suppose I should get going."

Pulling herself from the water and getting changed, Camilla gazed at a corner of the underground room, which had been bathed in the power of water throughout the many years she had lived on the cape.

Looking at an oakwood door that had suddenly appeared, she placed her hand on the knob and turned it.

The door opened with the sound of ringing bells.

"Welcome!"

Camilla was greeted by a blonde-haired follower of Chaos. She glanced at the other maid, who was doing her job silently in the corner.

“Greetings,” Camilla murmured to the blonde woman. “Could you take me to my seat?”

“Of course! Right this way.”

The female follower of Chaos quickly guided Camilla to an open chair.

On the way to the table, Camilla thought she spotted the Lord of Black. However, nobody had seen that deity—or her worshipers—for tens of thousands of years. Camilla couldn’t be certain that it was her.

Camilla sat down and then ordered the amazing confection she’d learned about here at Nekoya.

“Thank you. I’d like cold fruit jelly, please.”

“Absolutely. That’ll be just a moment.”

The follower of Chaos left for the kitchen, giving Camilla an opportunity to gaze around the restaurant.

At first glance, Camilla appeared to be a human mage. However, she was a high priestess of the Lord of Blue. As someone who’d received a powerful blessing, and possessed years of experience, she was more than capable of spotting the Ancient Six’s followers.

There really are a lot of priests and priestesses here.

A high priestess of the Lord of Light, with powers that matched Camilla’s own, sat at a far table. Nearby sat a lamia, who was clearly a high priestess of the Lord of Red. There was also another priestess of the Lord of Blue who’d left home, as Camilla had. Lately, that priestess visited the restaurant with a man—likely from the Western Continent—in tow. Last but not least was a priestess of the Lord of Earth, who’d also started bringing a man to the restaurant.

Camilla didn’t see him at Nekoya that day, but a priest of the Lord of Gold also dropped by the restaurant between fall and winter, when kumaala were in season.

As she looked at the various priests and priestesses from the southern lands,

Camilla couldn't help but feel a little nostalgic for home.

Few worshipers of the other deities could live in the waters the Lord of Blue ruled. Similarly, few followers of the Lord of Blue could live in the waterless lands ruled by other deities.

Thus, most of the Lord of Blue's followers held no ill feelings or resentment toward other believers and didn't fight with them. If anything, they often felt pity and kindness toward them since other believers couldn't live in the ocean.

While living in the Lord of Blue's domain, Camilla virtually never ran into other believers, since her home was especially deep within the water. Still, she could identify priests and priestesses by their attire, which reminded her of home.

Well, it's not like I can go back now.

Camilla's human legs, northern attire, and years of experience as a priestess granted her the ability to hide her own powers. None of the other believers in Nekoya knew her true identity.

After a while, the follower of Chaos returned with Camilla's order in hand. "Sorry for the wait! Here's your fruit jelly."

Camilla didn't mind the time she'd spent observing the priests and priestesses.

"You have my gratitude."

Where Camilla came from, followers of Chaos were enemies to be defeated. However, this was another world entirely. She took the fruit jelly from the young girl without a second thought.

"Take your time and enjoy!"

Camilla watched the waitress retreat and then picked up her spoon and looked down at the slime-like substance filling the translucent glass. The jelly was full of colorful fruit, cut into easy-to-eat pieces that floated beneath the jelly's surface.

It's so beautiful.

Nekoya had all kinds of confections, and they were all delicious. In terms of pure aesthetic beauty, however, Camilla considered jelly the pinnacle. There

was nothing quite like the dessert's transparent color.

As always, Camilla drove her spoon into the jelly, scooping some fruit out along with the see-through substance.

The jelly jiggled on her spoon. Camilla put it in her mouth.

The jelly was so soft that it felt as though it could melt at any moment. It was as smooth as the surface of a wet stone as it slid across her tongue, down her throat, and into her stomach.

Its only aftertaste was a cold, refreshing, sour flavor altogether different from ice cream. It was the perfect dish for the mermaid priestess, who struggled with summers on land.

Enjoying the jelly's smooth sweetness, Camilla got to thinking.

Hm. I wonder if there's a way to reproduce this soft texture?

The first time she'd eaten fruit jelly, Camilla had used her many years of experience to analyze how it was made.

The fruit in the jelly was boiled in sugar water, making it sweeter and softer than normal fruit.

Camilla had discovered a harvestable ocean plant that could solidify water after she washed, boiled, and strained it. She used that plant to make something similar to Nekoya's fruit jelly.

In the restaurant's world, ordering food required currency. So, to raise enough money to purchase fruit jelly, Camilla began teaching humans to make her version of the treat. It was good enough to become a somewhat famous dessert but was still rather rubbery. Its texture was nowhere close to the soft smoothness of Nekoya's jelly.

Camilla was still researching how to replicate that.

And then there's the other problem... This world's fruit.

Camilla enjoyed the fruit preserved within the jelly—mildly sour mikun, sweet margos, emerald grapes that looked like little jewels, white peaches cut into comb-like shapes, and some kind of extremely sour yellow fruit cut into rings. Last but not least was a red fruit with a completely different mouthfeel from

crunchy berries.

Some of the fruit in the jelly was raw and some had been boiled in sugar water. Each of the fruits had its own unique taste and passed smoothly through Camilla's mouth with no problem.

Camilla knew that there were similar fruits in her world—even fruits that were exactly the same.

The problem was that the fruits on Nekoya's side were significantly sweeter and more delicious than anything in Camilla's world. This had nothing to do with boiling the fruit in sugar water. It was simply a matter of quality.

If I could get these fruits on our side, I'm sure my jelly would improve tenfold. But maybe part of what makes this jelly so special is that I can only get it here.

Camilla continued thinking things over as she tore through her jelly. Eventually, she finished the dish and put her spoon down.

"Phew..."

The high priestess let out a huge sigh of contentment. This was the moment she most looked forward to every week.

Camilla called the restaurant's master over.

"Now then... Excuse me! Check, please."

"Aye."

Once she'd paid him, she returned to her basement, thinking about her plans for that afternoon as she walked back upstairs.

"Let's see, what's left for today?"

Camilla had no way of knowing that after she returned from Nekoya, two long-eared elves—descendants of the invaders from long ago—would visit her town. That fateful meeting would prove to be the elves' first encounter with a brand-new taste.

Chapter 73:

Peperoncino **T**here were more customers than usual that day.

“I shall return.”

The Red Queen carried her large silver pot of “beef stew” out of the restaurant with no trouble, and silence fell upon Nekoya.

Once the door closed, and the Red Queen went home with her stew, the workday was officially over. The restaurant’s three employees began to chat amongst themselves, enjoying the sweet release from a day of hard work.

“All right. Good work today, ladies.”

“Thank you very much! There sure were lots of customers today.”

I would like curry. As usual.

It was nine at night, Nekoya’s usual closing time. In the master’s world, that wasn’t considered terribly late. But in the other world, it was standard practice to go to bed once the sun set. Staying up late was rather rare, so very few people dropped by the restaurant after dark, and the folks who came to Nekoya in the evening seeking booze had all gone home already.

It had been a busy day due to the arrival of multiple halflings—little people about the size of human children who could probably have shut down an eating competition. Although Nekoya had barely any food left over, there was enough chicken curry and other ingredients for the master to feed his employees.

With work finished, the master stretched his arms.

He didn’t hate his job at Nekoya at all. In fact, he felt that it was extremely rewarding. Like anyone else, however, the master felt a sense of relief at the end of a hard day’s work. He returned to the kitchen with light steps.

Then it happened.

Ring ring.

The sound of bells filled the restaurant, signaling a customer’s arrival. When the master turned toward the entrance, he saw a brown-skinned young man

with black hair, a black beard, and slightly tattered white clothes.

The young man was a new face. This was probably his first time at Nekoya. That said, a customer was a customer.

“Hello...” Aletta said hesitantly.

“Welcome to Western Cuisine Nekoya!” The master greeted the young man with a warm smile.

“N-Nekoya? What is this place? Why is it in the middle of the desert?”

“Ah, well, actually...”

As he explained what Nekoya was, the master thought carefully. Given the ingredients he had left, what could he serve?

Nadel the traveling merchant rode his trusted camel beneath the shimmering full moon, watching his surroundings. Fortunately for Nadel, camels were tough creatures that could withstand the cold and didn’t slow down at night.

Nadel surveyed the dunes bathed in the blue moonlight, keeping his guard up. He was making sure that the corpses hidden below the sand didn’t rise from their graves, jealous of the living.

The great desert that covered so much of the Sand Nation had always been tremendously dangerous during the full moon. Yes, the embodiment of light and flame—the sun—was more than capable of burning the living to death during the day. However, the full moon held its own unique danger—that of being attacked by, and turned into, the undead.

Those who died of dehydration in this massive desert were rarely able to rest in peace. Thus, on nights when the moon—the embodiment of darkness and death—shone directly above the land, the dead rose from their graves and attempted to bring the living to their side.

I screwed up real bad. I should’ve known to avoid the full moon!

Nadel had stopped at a familiar oasis to get water, only to discover that it had

dried up. He'd ended up having to take the long way to another oasis, which had led him to this dangerous predicament. His original plan had been to arrive in town before the full moon rose, and to use the money he'd earned selling silk in the port to pay for a room at the inn and some liquor. Unfortunately, that plan had gone out the window.

I wanted to get to town before the sun set, at least.

Nadel was about half a day's travel from town. If he kept his course, he would arrive by morning. The only problem was the full moon up above.

I sense something strange... Hm?

Nadel stopped his camel, noticing something in his peripheral vision. A single door stood on the blue-tinged sand.

A mirage, perhaps? No... That's impossible.

It was the middle of the night, and the full moon sat high in the sky. Nadel had never heard of anyone seeing a mirage at night.

"So, it must be an actual door. Maybe it even opens."

Dismounting from his camel, Nadel touched the door, confirming that it was real. It was extremely well polished and constructed. Moonlight reflected off its smooth surface.

Nadel turned the handle ever so slightly. He was surprised to find that the door wasn't only unlocked—it even opened.

"What? What is this? Some kind of restaurant?"

Nadel caught a whiff of an aroma that smelled like various spices and some kind of meat soup.

It made his dry throat ache and reminded his empty stomach that it was, in fact, empty.

Come to think of it, all I've eaten today are dried figs.

Nadel's journey had been rushed due to a lack of water. He hadn't had much time to eat. In an attempt to keep himself from sweating unnecessarily throughout the day, he'd shielded his body with his hood and cape, washing the

figs down with his limited water supply.

This was what led the merchant to opening the door and stepping through to the other side.

The sound of bells ringing filled the air, snapping Nadel back to his senses, but it was too late.

“Hello...”

“Welcome to Western Cuisine Nekoya!”

Peeking into the shop, Nadel was greeted by a black-haired human man who resembled a Mountain Nation resident and a demon girl with horns on her head.

Nadel’s glass of water was so cold, it gave him a headache. Although water was a precious commodity in the desert, he downed his glass loudly.

“Hey! Another pitcher of water, please!”

The water, which tasted faintly of lemon, filled Nadel’s dehydrated body. He nearly teared up over how delicious it was.

The first water he drank from the well-made glass cup was meant to wash his dehydration away. He took his time drinking the second cup, restoring his body to normal.

“Yes, right away!”

In response to Nadel’s request, the demon waitress immediately brought another silver pitcher of water. As far as Nadel was concerned, she wasn’t particularly voluptuous, but the way her uniform exposed her legs like some sort of dancer was rather seductive.

I was worried at first, but this water has made this visit more than worthwhile.

Being a merchant, Nadel was always concerned about getting his money’s worth.

A wooden bowl of the lukewarm water sold in town by the water merchants cost about one copper coin, so the fact that Nadel could drink so much ice-cold

water for the five copper coins he'd paid the master meant he was getting a bargain. Nadel estimated that this amount of water was worth at least twelve copper coins in town.

Quite the stroke of luck today!

Nadel went over the master's words in his head.

According to its owner, this restaurant was located in another world and was accessible only via a mysterious door that appeared on Nadel's side once a week. For a certain amount of money—slightly high prices for commoners, as far as Nadel could tell—one could order otherworldly meals.

Unfortunately, however, Nadel would be unable to eat the soup or spicy dish he'd smelled when he entered the restaurant.

"I really don't have many ingredients left," explained the master. "I can only serve you curry or peperoncino."

Still, Nadel felt blessed that he would get to eat a warm meal that evening.

Anything the master served would be far better than the dried figs he'd been eating. And once he ordered the "pepewhatever," he was allowed to drink as much water as he liked.

Nadel sighed in relief as his body absorbed the water, thinking about the otherworldly dish he'd ordered. He could hear oil sizzling in the kitchen in the back.

Earlier, the master had explained to Nadel that the "pepewhatever" was made of wheat noodles with pork, cooked with oil seasoned with chili pepels and garlik.

At any rate, the master here must be reasonably talented. I doubt he'll serve anything too bizarre.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your peperoncino."

With that, the master set a plate down on the table in front of Nadel.

Oh. The smell alone is rather appetizing.

The merchant gulped as he felt his stomach tighten. On the plate were rings of bright red chili pepels and thinly cut garlik pieces as yellow as the desert sands.

The dish also held thin slices of colorful meat, bright green herbs, and noodles covered with yellow oil.

All of these elements were beautifully arranged atop the mountain of golden noodles. Nadel's stomach growled as he took in the delectable aroma of the chili pepels, garlik, and meat, his nostrils flaring.

"Please, enjoy, and take your time."

The master offered those words before vanishing. Nadel picked up the silver fork beside the plate and dug fiercely into the meal in front of him.

It's hot but delicious!

Nadel immediately spun pasta around his fork and put it into his mouth, then reached unthinkingly for the water glass to one side and took a sip.

The noodles were as thin as yarn spun from sheep's wool. They were high quality, golden, and dressed with just the right amount of oil. The yellow oil was so fine that Nadel assumed it must've been pressed from an excellent crop. It absorbed the chili pepels' heat perfectly.

The dish also included a spicy variety of chili pepel. At first glance, they appeared to be nothing but small flakes resting on top of the pasta, but they burned Nadel's throat.

This isn't just spicy, though. It's also incredibly good!

The otherworldly noodle dish was undoubtedly hot, but it had much more going for it than that. The aromatic, lightly cooked garlic crunched and fell apart in Nadel's mouth. The salted and seasoned smoked meat maintained its savory taste, and the green herbs topping the other ingredients provided a gentle but recognizable flavor to the dish.

The noodles were salted, but that flavor had melted into the oil and was quite gentle. Clearly, the master hadn't just sprinkled salt over the noodles and called it a day.

This oil is excellent. Not only is it refined, it has successfully absorbed the other ingredients' flavors.

The true star of the dish was indeed the high-quality yellow oil.

It was so completely pure that Nadel felt as though he could have drunk it on its own. It was capable of taking on the other ingredients' much stronger flavors and fusing them into one.

The noodles absorbed the oil and served as the vessel to transport the flavors to Nadel's mouth.

Depending on what techniques I use, I could make this dish on my side.

Cooking anything as delicious as the meal in front of Nadel would require not only immense skill but also a lot of research. Still, Nadel felt that something similar could be created.

If I figure the recipe out, this might end up being one hell of a product.

Since Nadel was a businessman, the gears in his head started to turn as he filled his stomach. Eventually, all that remained on his plate were small puddles of yellow oil.

Unable to hold himself back, Nadel placed a second order immediately.

"Excuse me! Another plate, please!"

Returning to the desert, the merchant sat atop his camel, leaving for the next town as the blue moon hovered above.

I hope I can get there before dawn.

Stomach full and body hydrated, Nadel forgot about his exhaustion completely, now wide awake as he began the night's travel. He would get to town before sunrise, rest at the inn for a day, and begin to market his wares.

He'd sell his stock of silks, use that money to buy more products, and then set off on a new journey. He might even exchange information with fellow traveling merchants over a cup of cafa, telling them of the otherworldly meal he'd indulged in.

Filled with hope for the future, Nadel rode across the ocean of sand.

Chapter 74:

Cheesecake, Once More

“Night Strider” Hilda, a demon mercenary operating out of the Empire, visited the forest yet again that day.

“Cool. It’s here.”

Making sure that the oakwood door was in its usual spot, Hilda reached for the handle, only to be interrupted.

“Hey! Hey! What the bloody hell’s going on with that there door? Why be it here in a place like this?” One voice spoke the tongue of the Empire, albeit rather brutishly.

“Well, we’ve confirmed your objective, at least.” The other voice was feminine and polite, with a hint of a Western Continent accent.

Hilda turned around instinctively, raising her trusty crossbow in response to the suspicious voices behind her, just to find herself facing a pair of women.

“Wh-what the—?! Why are you two here?!”



The women were fellow demon mercenaries, just as strong as Hilda.

“You’ve been actin’ mighty suspicious, get me? So, we tailed ya, missy.”

Alicia the “Fembear” was blessed with bear forearms and all the strength that came with them. She crushed her enemies to bits with her trusty war axe and strong arms.

“How very unlike you not to notice our approach.”

Beneath the “Poison Viper” Ranija’s beautiful looks and brown Western Continent skin was a deadly assassin. She coated her short sword with the lethal poison her snake fangs secreted—inflicting one wound with that substance was enough to fell any magic beast. Ranija’s gecko fingers let her hang from any surface, even ceilings, which had helped her assassinate countless foes.

The Empire was certainly vast. However, few female demon mercenaries were comparable to Hilda when it came to raw skill. These two were among that number.

A demon’s strength was determined by the blessing they received from the demon lord, a being that flaunted its infinite life force and chaotic nature.

The type of blessing a demon was born with was more important than its gender or its age.

Long ago, when the world reviled demons as enemies, the demon lord’s blessings had brought them incredible power.

Some demons were blessed with large horns capable of generating magic that far surpassed humans’ and elves’ abilities or multiple goat heads that cast magic simultaneously. Others were blessed with hard insect armor that deflected thousands of arrows at once and insect wings that allowed long-range flight. Still others were blessed with basilisk breath that absorbed objects and then fired them back to strike down enemies. These same demons had the ability to turn things they looked at into stone.

The demon lord’s blessings were fickle. There were demon children born with

weak blessings but also those born with blessings so powerful that they became monarchs and ruled over their own people. But the demons who battled the humans were all absurdly powerful.

With such power, they'd destroyed humanity's oldest civilization, the Ancient Kingdom. The battle between humanity and the demon kings had raged for five long centuries.

Seventy years ago, four human assassins had appeared and killed many of the demon kings, then felled the demon lord itself.

Humanity later called this conflict the great demon war. With the demon lord gone, the demons' blessings weakened significantly. It became increasingly rare to be born with the kinds of blessings the King of Lions possessed.

This was precisely why Hilda and the other two demon mercenaries were well aware of one another and occasionally even cooperated. Warriors with their talents were rare these days.

"Look, to be perfectly honest, you been mighty suspicious of late. For instance, you've been takin' on jobs in this middle-of-nowhere forest."

"Precisely. That first goblin extermination job you took on made sense for you, but everything after it has seemed more fitting for a rookie mercenary, not someone of your talents. I was rather worried about you."

Thanks to their connection with Hilda, the pair could tell that she was acting strange.

Hilda was a fairly well-known mercenary, all things considered. She typically took tough jobs that paid well.

So why would such a talented fighter take numerous cheap jobs in the same area, despite not suffering from any injuries? Realizing that there had to be a reason behind Hilda's actions, the two demons had followed her into the woods.

"So? What's the deal with that there door? Does it lead to some ruin or somethin'?" Alicia asked.

“No, not at all.”

Hilda shook her head, resigned to the fact that she’d somehow overlooked the other mercenaries’ presence and let them see the door. It would be difficult for her to monopolize this place any further.

After thinking for a moment, Hilda decided to offer the pair a brief explanation.

“Behind this door, an otherworldly restaurant sells cheap, delicious treats.”

“Say wha...? You’ve been keepin’ all them secrets over *sweets*?!”

“Now, now. Calm yourself,” Ranija urged Alicia. She turned to Hilda. “I admit, I’m rather curious. It’s unlike you to go so far over desserts.”

Unfortunately, the two women didn’t seem to believe Hilda.

The sound of bells ringing marked the arrival of the three demon mercenaries.

“Ah! Welcome, Hilda!” Aletta greeted the demon she was familiar with first but was surprised to see Hilda accompanied by two others. “Oh, you have friends with you?” The waitress’s expression morphed quickly into a smile. “It’s nice to meet you both!”

Waitressing at a restaurant meant always being cordial.

“Hiya. I’m back. Could you get us some menus?”

“Absolutely! One moment.”

Hilda had little need for a menu, since she almost always ordered soufflé cheesecake. However, she had guests with her today. She guided them to an empty table.

Alicia’s eyes darted around the restaurant. Her fierce smile deepened as she noticed that the customers included humans and monsters alike.

I get it now. This really is another world. Normally, it’d be a damn bloodbath if all these people got together in one place.

Like the demons of the past, Alicia possessed a strong bloodlust. She licked

her lips as she imagined the carnage that would have ensued if they weren't at the restaurant.

"So, this restaurant serves otherworldly sweets, eh? There sure is an interesting bunch here."

"Indeed."

Ranija caught sight of a surprising trio. She couldn't believe her eyes.

The Sand Nation's first prince and his little sister sat in the restaurant. The princess of the Empire accompanied them.

My, my. Now I understand. I heard claims that the Sand Nation and the Empire have been trying to come together lately. This must be why.

Ranija had stumbled upon the truth behind a rumor making the rounds of the underworld.

Nekoya's two new guests had already concluded that the restaurant was bizarre by the time Aletta returned, holding a book she called a "menu."

"Sorry for the wait! Here you go."

The demon girl handed them the books. She had a weak blessing but wore rather cute attire.

"Thanks, Aletta."

Hilda took the book in her hands and opened it for the two mercenaries.

"Ladies, this is the menu. Everything the restaurant serves is written down in here. Personally, I recommend the cheesecake."

The pair collected themselves, looking at the menu's "desserts" section.

"Hrm. So, these are those dang confections you're so crazy about, then?"

"My! There are so many options—including three kinds of that so-called cheesecake you recommended."

"Yeah, well, everything here is great. Recently, I bought the supposed 'best dessert' in the Empire, but it was super disappointing. This place's sweets are

ten times better.”

*Even though the Empire’s sweets cost ten times more than the stuff here.
What a laugh.*

Alicia was slightly annoyed by how enthusiastically Hilda praised the desserts.

“Whatever.” She raised her voice. “It’s not like I can tell what’s good or bad. I can’t even remember the last time I had one of them sweets.”

“Indeed. After all, sugar is quite expensive in the Empire.”

Alicia had no way of knowing which cheesecake was good. Therefore, she figured they could all order one slice of each type.

“Hey, you over there! I wanna order! Get us all three slices each of them cheesecakes ya got!”

“Of course! Thank you!”

Alicia wasn’t particularly well-educated, so she didn’t know much about fair prices. However, she could at least tell that one piece of cheesecake only cost a few copper coins. The order wouldn’t dent her wallet.

“Now then! I’m pretty intrigued by these supposedly amazing sweets of yers. How’s about we compare ’em all?”

The other two women agreed to Alicia’s proposal.

Aletta lined up the cakes in front of the trio.

“Sorry for the wait! Here are your cheesecake slices.”

On each large plate were three pieces of cheesecake—a smooth, white “icebox” cheesecake, a baked cheesecake with a brown surface, and slightly softer soufflé cheesecake. All three looked completely different.

“Shall we?” asked Alicia.

Hilda and Raniya nodded. They picked up their forks and began to eat.

Alicia went for the delicious-looking brown baked cheesecake first.

Ooh, this is yummy!

She plunged her fork excitedly into the cake, taking a massive chunk out of it—about half the slice. Immediately, she understood why Hilda had become such a fan of the restaurant.

The cheesecake's heavy mouthfeel filled her mouth. Its flavor mixed the slight tanginess of cheese with the sweetness of refined sugar. The orange slices decorating the surface were thinly cut and boiled in syrup, skin and all. Their slightly bitter, sour taste mixed well with the cheesecake's inherent sweetness, adding to its flavor.

Even the cheese itself—an ingredient Alicia was used to eating—proved to be its own feast, mixed with sugar and cooked over flames. The demon mercenary wiped out the baked cheesecake in three big bites.

This ain't nearly enough. I should order more.

Ranija, on the other hand, reached for the icebox cheesecake.

Oh... Is this uncooked?

Her unique observational abilities informed her that that was the case. Puzzled, Ranija removed a piece from the corner of the slice and examined it thoroughly. It was white, smooth, and extremely odd. Unlike the other two slices, the icebox cheesecake showed no signs of baking, which begged the question... *How did it maintain its form so neatly?*

No matter. I suppose I'll understand once I take a bite.

The cheesecake's texture reminded Ranija of a slime, which made her hesitate. Then she remembered that royalty frequented the restaurant—the master couldn't possibly serve anything *that* odd.

Making up her mind, Ranija brought the slippery substance to her mouth and took a bite.

Dear me... Is this cheese?

The mouthfeel was a surprise.

It was smooth, like silk, but melted in her mouth. It wasn't sweetened as heavily as her hometown's desserts, but that was part of the appeal.

Ranija and the others were used to eating aged cheese. However, the cheese

in the cake was refreshing and tasted heavily of milk. It was much tangier than regular cheese, but again, that was what Raniya enjoyed about it.

It resembled yogurt, but the actual flavor was something else entirely. Raniya had never imagined that cheese like this existed.

Furthermore, the red berries that accompanied the cheesecake complemented it extremely well.

I get it now. This cheese specifically pairs with the fruit.

The sugary, but slightly acidic, berries harmonized with the cake's intense sourness, and the crushed berries atop the cheesecake helped bring out its flavor.

Hee hee... Looks like they're enjoying it!

Hilda watched with a satisfied grin as the other two demon mercenaries first expressed surprise at the cheesecakes, then proceeded to enjoy them in complete silence.

At the same time, she was thoroughly enjoying her soufflé—the light mouthfeel, the gentle flavor of the cheese melting in her mouth, the sweet and sour blueberries.

However many times Hilda ate this cake, she never grew tired of it. The other two varieties were delicious in their own right, but as far as cheesecake went, the soufflé was on another level.

Hilda had no way of knowing that the other two demons preferred a different slice, nor that the three would eventually fight over which was most delicious.

It would be a while yet before the Empire's three famous demon mercenaries would officially work together.

Chapter 75:

Potato Chips “Croquette”—a regular at the Restaurant to Another World—met the boy on that fateful day when the master had to run errands away from Nekoya.

“Mmm... I think that’s it for today.”

Croquette cleaned the remaining sauce off his plate with his white bread. He swallowed it down, signaling the meal’s end.

When he was younger, Croquette had been one hell of an eater. But he could still pack food away, even now. This was his third plate of the day.

His stomach was nice and warm, and he was full of the unique satisfaction that came with a delicious meal.

“Now then! I suppose I’m alone. Eh... I’ll take a break before heading back.”

There wasn’t a soul in the restaurant. Granted, the place wasn’t particularly popular to begin with.

Still, when Croquette swung by, he usually found the elderly man called Minced Meat Cutlet or the old adventurer Pork Loin Cutlet sitting down to a meal. Today, however, they’d left early to attend to business.

The master had departed to do some quick shopping, leaving the restaurant unguarded.

Croquette had already paid, so all that was left was to head home. However, getting back from Nekoya would be a bit of a pain.

When Croquette was younger, he often went on long rides on his horse. Even his closest private residence required him to travel on horseback.

“When I retire, I really must build a palace near here.”

Croquette decided to relax for a while. Then it happened.

“Heeeeey! Gramps! You in?”

From the back of the restaurant—the kitchen, in fact—a young boy appeared.

“Weiiiird. Grandma said Gramps was in the restaurant. Wait... Huh? Are you a customer?”

Looking around the dining room, the boy was startled by the sight of Croquette.

“Wait, ain’t Nekoya closed on Saturdays? Huh... Whatever. Welcome!”

Despite his momentary surprise, the boy remembered the words of his grandmother, whom he lived with. *Always be sure to greet customers.* He bowed his head to the strangely dressed old man.

Meanwhile, Croquette had figured out the boy’s identity already.

Hrm. The master’s grandson, I presume?

The child was covered in dirt, and his clothes were quite strange. Some sort of odd script was embroidered on his short-sleeved shirt, and his short pants revealed his thin, hairless legs up to his thighs. He wore socks and dirty white shoes made of, not leather, but some other strange material.

The boy dressed differently from both the commoners and nobles of Croquette’s world. In other words, he was from *this* world, which meant he was connected to the master.

The boy’s identity seemed clear, so Croquette was comfortable explaining the situation to him.

“Mmm... Unfortunately, the master’s out doing some shopping.”

“Oh, seriously? Dang,” the boy replied, his shoulders sinking. He gazed into the bag in his right hand. “And I came all this way to give him these.”

“Hrm. And what might those be?”

The boy peered into the translucent leather bag at what looked like large and small objects covered in dirt. Croquette had certainly never seen anything like them before.

“Huh? These are potatoes I grew in class.” Knowing that he should answer customers politely and concisely, the boy explained that they came from his school’s fields. “It took the whole class to dig them out. Teach said they’re real-deal Hokkaido potatoes!”

The students had spent all of the Saturday morning class harvesting the potatoes. The boy—who'd lived with his grandparents ever since his parents had passed away—brought them to his grandfather, hoping to have him make delicious potato chips. Unfortunately, it was not to be.

“Potatoes, you say? Some sort of crop, then.”

Once again, Croquette figured out the situation based on the boy's explanation.

Since the boy had brought them to a chef, this “potato” crop was clearly some sort of edible ingredient.

“Wait. You don't know what potatoes are? That's weird.”

“Mmm. Well, you see, I'm not particularly knowledgeable on this side, unfortunately.” Croquette nodded at the somewhat puzzled boy. “So, what do you make with potatoes?”

His question was honest. Potatoes didn't exist in his world, so there was no way for him to know what dishes they were used in.

The boy thought for a moment and then named some dishes was familiar with.

“Er, well, all sorts of foods. I brought these today 'cause I was hoping Gramps would make potato chips. But they're also used in curry, stew, and even pork soup. You also got potato salad and fries. Those are delicious. Oh, and meat and potatoes, croquettes...”

“What?! Croquettes?! You can make croquettes with these potato things?!” The old man's eyes opened wide.

As the gentleman's nickname implied, croquettes were exactly what he'd been eating earlier. As far as he was concerned, they were the single most delicious item on Nekoya's menu, bar none. So of course he was surprised to hear croquettes come up in the conversation.

“Yeah, you can. You really don't know much, do you? Gramps is always sayin' that you can't make good croquettes without potatoes.”

The boy laughed as he explained. How very strange it was that this old man,

who looked around his grandfather's age, was so uneducated on such basic recipes.

"I see. So croquettes are made with these potato things." Croquette made his decision. He presented the boy with a proposal.

"Young one, would you be willing to part with those potatoes of yours? I wouldn't ask for them for free, of course."

Croquette reached into his pouch, pulled something out, and showed it to the boy.

The master normally never sold customers his ingredients or seasonings, aside from the finished meals he cooked. Croquette thought this might be his only chance to get his hands on one of Nekoya's primary ingredients.

In exchange for the potatoes, the old man took out a glittering coin.

"What the heck's that? Foreign money or something? It's kinda soft," the master's grandson replied suspiciously as he inspected it.

Although the coin was round, it was bent compared to the hundred-yen and ten-yen coins the boy was used to handling. The profile of a man's face on its surface looked a lot like the old man in front of him.

In response to the boy's question, the man nodded.

"Mm-hmm. This is indeed my nation's imperial currency. It's not quite as valuable as the currency of the Kingdom or of the ancient elves. Still, it's worth at least a thousand of these."

The man produced another coin, this one likely familiar to the boy. Its copper surface depicted some kind of number written in this world's script and a picture of a weed. On the opposite side was a picture of a spiritual-looking shrine. Only an incredibly skilled craftsman could have carved images so detailed into something so small.

This was the other world's copper currency.

The old man had received the coin as "change" for his meal during a previous visit to Nekoya. He felt that the design was far too detailed for a copper coin. Since he had no way of using the other world's money outside the restaurant,

however, he kept it on his person. Copper was copper, which was perfect. Even the boy in front of him was familiar with copper coins and knew their value.

“Hmm. A thousand times ten yen... Huh?! Isn’t that ten thousand yen?!”

The boy indeed understood the worth of the round, sparkling coin. Like the master, he was surprised once he’d deduced its value.

“Mmm. Indeed. This is worth ten thousand of your ‘yens.’ I’d like to give you this in exchange for your potatoes. I would consider it a good deal.”

“Well, yeah. These were meant to be a gift, anyway, so I still got more at home. Okay, mister! I’ll do you a favor and take you up on your offer!”

The master’s grandson agreed with all the arrogance one would expect of a boy his age. Putting the gold coin into his pocket, he handed the old man the bag of potatoes.

“That’s settled.”

“Yup!”

The pair smiled at each other. They’d both come away from the trade with more than they’d come into it with.

“Now, I shall be on my way. Give the master my regards.”

Croquette knew all too well that, if the master returned and found out about the trade, things could get dicey. He stood and departed.

He came out the other side of the door into empty wilderness. His beautiful, beloved black horse was tied to a tree nearby, patiently waiting for its master to return.

The old man looked into the bag of dirt-covered potatoes, smiling.

“Potatoes, eh? Who could’ve imagined that I’d get my hands on croquettes’ core ingredient, just like that?! Excellent! I must grow them first.”

He placed the bag of potatoes on his horse and rode back to his abode, excitedly making plans for the future.

The Lord of Earth’s priest managed the palace garden, and a former court mage had discovered that you could actually cultivate all manner of herbs once

said to be ungrowable.

With assistance from these two, Croquette firmly believed that he would be able to reproduce the otherworldly crop.

“It shouldn’t be a problem. We’ll only need to grow enough for me to make croquettes!”

Croquette had little knowledge of the unfamiliar crops required to make Nekoya’s meals. But if a child as small as the master’s grandson could cultivate them, they couldn’t be that difficult to grow.

If Croquette had his professionals handle the work in the palace’s vast fields, it wouldn’t raise much fuss. After all, he only required enough potatoes for him to eat. And if he failed, he failed.

As a man who’d spent much of his life fighting to expand his nation, Croquette felt that he deserved to be a bit greedy in his final days.

“The boy said that he dug up these potatoes, so they must grow in the ground. We won’t have to worry about birds getting to them.”

If things worked out, and Croquette was able to grow a large number of potatoes, he wasn’t against the idea of sharing them.

Croquette—known as Wilhelm, the Empire’s very first emperor—pondered the potatoes as he rode his horse home. However, he had no way of knowing yet that his hobby would affect the entire nation. He also had no way of knowing that, of the many things he would accomplish in his life, this would be one of his greatest achievements.

The Lord of Earth bestowed the cobbler’s tuber, a legendary food of the gods, upon the faithful emperor as he mourned for his citizens. With few fields in which to grow wheat, the Empire’s people were suffering. The mages, who lacked faith in the deity, seemed certain that elves had created the crop using their magical prowess. However, nobody had ever heard of elves growing cobbler’s tubers before the Lord of Earth gave the food to the emperor.

Even in lands ravaged by a lack of wheat, cobbler's tubers could be grown and harvested in large quantities. Most important, however, was the fact that they were delicious. With the help of the emperor himself, the crop spread throughout the nation.

If asked what their main food was, most of the Empire's residents would answer "boiled cobbler's tubers," rather than black wheat bread. Thanks to the cobbler's tuber, the Lord of Earth had expanded their power within the Empire.

The Empire considered the Lord of Earth the most powerful of the Six Ancients.

On the Eastern Continent, the Lord of Light possessed the most followers and had no issues felling the undead. The Lord of Fire's followers were all smiths or warriors. The Goddess of Darkness—the Lord of Light's beloved, who controlled death and darkness—was worshiped by those who granted death to the living.

Compared to them, the Lord of Earth wasn't particularly good at combat.

On the other hand, the Lord of Earth could revive the world's natural treasures, making plants bud, flowers bloom, and trees grow...even heal the planet itself. Thus, those who dedicated their lives to agriculture deeply trusted the deity.

Every year, the Empire created ten additional farm towns for the express purpose of growing cobbler's tubers, so it made sense that the Lord of Earth was so revered.

The Lord of Earth's priests and priestesses understood the importance of cobbler's tubers.

At the god's shrine, they treated cobbler's tubers—the origin of their faith—as a holy food. At the same time, they conducted in-depth research on the crop and its powers.

A new page would soon be written in the Empire's history of the cobbler's tuber.

Another imperial town had been built in a region that had seen multiple

farming villages sprout up in recent years. Sophie, a priestess of the Lord of Earth, had been transferred to the town's single shrine.

Sophie had just finished her work for the day. With light steps, she secretly made her way toward the forest on the town's outskirts without anyone noticing.

Aaah! I'm so hungry. I can't wait.

She passed several small, new cabins that had recently been constructed and then faced an area where about half the trees had been reduced to stumps.

If any more trees were cut down, there was a real risk of the forest dying, so people were banned from woodcutting in the area. That was why foot traffic was so low.

Sophie was from the imperial capital—a giant stone city that had clear-cut the neighboring trees. Therefore, when she was first assigned to this town, she had wandered the forest with great interest. That was when she found the oakwood door with the cat illustration.

Sophie stepped through the door, chest full of expectation.

The sound of bells marked her arrival as she glanced around the restaurant and spotted her "friend."

"Ah, you're here, Adelia." Sophie waved. "Good afternoon!"

Adelia, a priestess of the Lord of Earth, hailed from a foreign land. A beast person with doglike ears and a tail, she was incredibly kind and could withstand fierce training as a priestess.

Since Sophie was a citizen of the Empire, she had all kinds of inhuman associates and acquaintances, so Adelia's appearance didn't faze her. She had no problem calling Adelia a friend.

"Yah! Lawng time mo fee."

Adelia, the Lord of Earth's beast priestess, packed her cheeks with her favorite food—fried eggs stuffed with cobbler's tubers—as she greeted her friend. With her eyes, she directed Sophie to the chair in front of her.

Watching Sophie sit down, Adelia swallowed and explained the situation.

“See, my little bro brought some cash over, so I finally got to visit the restaurant. He says he’s gonna drop in again once the moon changes. I’ll introduce you to him then.”

Although Sophie was human, she didn’t follow the Lord of White. Rather, she was a priestess of the Lord of Earth, a rarity.

Perhaps because she and Adelia had been taught in different ways, Sophie couldn’t transform into a dragon. On the other hand, she was adept at controlling nature’s blessings. Adelia felt that her friend was in no way her inferior, as far as talent and ability were concerned.

They were nearly the same age and priestesses of the same deity. It made sense that they’d get along.

“Welcome! Have you decided on your order?”

As the pair described recent happenings in their lives to each other, Aletta—the restaurant’s demon waitress—swung by the table and took Sophie’s order.

“Yeah! I’ll have the usual—a beer and a large order of potato chips. As far as flavors go, salt, seaweed-salt, and cheese, please!” Sophie answered excitedly.

“Those’ll be out right away!”

Aletta returned to the kitchen.

Sophie and Adelia enjoyed casual conversation as Adelia shared her fried eggs. Later, Sophie would share her chips in return.

It didn’t take long for Aletta to come back to the table with Sophie’s food and beer in hand.

“Sorry about the wait! Here are your potato chips and beer.”

Aletta put down a large plate full of fried cobbler’s tubers. Next to it, she placed a mug of golden alcohol, its surface covered in foam.

“Please enjoy!”

“Will do! I’ll call you if I need anything else.”

The delicious aroma of the cobbler’s tubers made its way to Sophie’s nose. Gulping loudly, she put her hands over the Silver Sigil around her neck and

prayed.

“All right... Oh great lord who watches over the earth, we thank you for this blessing of food.”

Offering the Lord of Earth a simple prayer before her meal, Sophie reached for her plate without even grabbing a fork.

Mmm. Geez. Fresh fried potato chips are on a whole 'nother level.

First up were the plain salted chips. They were the simplest of the bunch and the easiest taste to start with.

The chip in Sophie's hand was hot, like fresh fries. She popped it into her mouth. The moment she bit in, it fell apart with the enjoyable mouthfeel she'd expected. Alongside the sensation of the potato chip crunching, she tasted the flavors of the high-quality cobbler's tuber and oil. Those tastes, and the simple salt seasoning, filled her with joy.

Mmm... It's all about fry "skins"!

A sip of foamy beer confirmed that thought. As far as Sophie was concerned, the best part of the fry—an imperial delicacy—was its skin.

Sophie's parents ran a fry stall in the imperial capital. Among the Empire's citizens, it was highly contested whether the best part of fries was the moist inside or the crunchy skin.

Sophie was a “skin” kind of girl, so for her, potato chips were truly a delicacy among delicacies. After all, they were basically fried tuber skins.

Aaaah! And the seasoning's just perfect!

The best thing about Nekoya was that you could order large servings of potato chips for the same exact price. They even came with three different flavors.

The first flavor Sophie had picked was salt. The next was seaweed, a unique, otherworldly herb that paired well with salt. The last flavor she'd requested mixed the chips with shredded cheese that tasted of rich milk.

All of the chips were still piping hot. Nonetheless, Sophie continued to munch on them, sipping her beer all the while.

“Mmm, theefs finly fwied cofflers are dewifous foo!”

Adelia and Sophie continued to converse, the latter ordering another beer. The fact that she got to enjoy the chips with a fellow believer she got along with, beast person or not, made them all the more delicious.

She and Adelia discussed many different topics—their business, their taste in partners, and serious matters pertaining to their beliefs.

As the pair enjoyed their time together, the potato chips eventually grew cold. That wasn't a problem, however. Even cold, potato chips were still delicious.

“Fries” were cobbler's tubers that had been thinly sliced and fried in oil. They were extremely popular among the Empire's commoners, but once they got cold, their deliciousness decreased significantly.

The skin, in particular, grew moist and lost its crunchy mouthfeel. That was a heavy blow to a fry's taste.

Potato chips were different, though. They eventually grew moist if left out in the open for days, but they didn't lose flavor after cooling. Eating cold potato chips was nice. There was no danger of burning your fingers or tongue, which made them easier to eat fast.

Sophie hung out with her friend until the sun set, eating potato chips, drinking beer, and having a great time.

As the night's darkness set in, she returned to the forest with a spring in her step, making her way back to the shrine.

The food was good, and Mom and Dad said that business is going great in their last letter. Everything's awesome!

Sophie had been concerned when she was first assigned to this shrine. She would be leaving her home and spending years building up a brand-new town. But now...

You never really know where life will take you.

After first experiencing potato chips, Sophie had written home to her parents about the mysterious food.

She described the strange snack made by cutting cobbler's tubers so thin they were almost see-through and then frying them in oil. The simple dish didn't yet exist in the Empire.

Potato chips had much in common with her world's fries, but were nonetheless their own animal. The dish quickly became popular and led Sophie's parents to great prosperity.

It was initially concerning when other stalls copied them and made their own potato chips. But her parents were still the "original" creators, so business continued to boom for them.

Sophie laughed at the concept of "original," but nevertheless, she was happy about her parents' good fortune. The otherworldly restaurant's potato chips were brand new to their world, and they utilized the cobbler's tuber—the same holy crop that brought success to her beloved parents.

Cobbler's tubers really are magnificent.

This fact only deepened Sophie's faith in the Lord of Earth.

Chapter 76:

Morning Set, Once More **A**t around ten in the evening, with cleanup finished, the Restaurant to Another World closed its doors. After her post-work shower, Aletta changed into the pretty secondhand white dress she'd treated herself to, in honor of the coming spring.

"Nice work today, ladies. Here's your pay."

The master handed Aletta a brown envelope. The text written on it read, *Wage: twelve silver coins.*

"Thank you very much!" Noticing that the envelope was a little heavier than usual, Aletta tilted her head. "Huh?"

"Oh, that's right! I forgot to tell you. You're getting a raise," the master explained, delighted at Aletta's reaction. "From now on, you'll receive twelve silver coins every day you work here."

At first, Aletta could barely wrap her head around the words that had come out of the master's mouth. After a moment, everything clicked into place, and she raised her voice in surprise.

"Wh-what...?! Are you sure?!"

Aletta had been scolded at previous jobs, and even had her pay lowered. She'd never gotten a raise before.

Her work at Nekoya was something like a dream. She couldn't have asked for more, and she was already thrilled with what she felt was a high wage. Aletta had never once considered the possibility of a raise, but she could tell that the master was serious.

"Of course! You've been at this for a year now, and I can see how serious and hardworking you are. As far as I'm concerned, you deserve this," the master continued, a big smile on his face.

In truth, he meant every word. Aletta was a great waitress, never getting

orders wrong. He could count on one hand how many times she'd broken plates over the course of the year.

Sure, she'd been a bit rigid at first when it came to interacting with customers. Lately, however, she'd become excellent at performing her duties with all manner of guests.

Besides, it'd be a real bummer if she quit because she thought the pay was too low.

The master didn't know much about how things worked on the other side. However, Aletta—who looked around the same age as the local high schoolers—had become an absolutely necessary presence on Saturdays. They'd brought someone else on recently, but things were still crazy busy at Nekoya.

On Saturdays, Aletta worked all day, from open to close—approximately fourteen hours. If you divided that into her hourly pay, she'd been receiving about seven hundred yen an hour, which was far too low. That was part of the reason the master had given her a raise.

“Well, if you're sure... Um, thank you so much!”

Aletta was tremendously grateful. For her, this was like a dream come true.

It seemed crazy that just a year ago she'd thought she would literally die of starvation. Now she felt as though she were the world's most blessed young lady.

“I've got today's goods.”

The master pulled out a bag full of the items Aletta had requested earlier. Seeing the bag, the demon girl regained her composure.

“Thank you!”

She quickly took a silver coin from her pay, handed it to the master, and then took the bag.

Aletta's employer in the other world, a young woman, was a regular at the Restaurant to Another World. She stopped by once or twice each month to indulge in her favorite food, minced meat cutlet. She'd apparently asked Aletta

to do a bit of shopping for her, so Aletta used a little of her wage to buy treats and food from the restaurant.

The first thing Aletta had asked for was a tin of cookies from the Flying Puppy. The master had given her one as a celebratory present for getting a job, but now she bought a tin pretty much every week. She also bought a minced meat sandwich, her boss's favorite food. The young lady apparently couldn't swing by today, since she had business in town.

That wasn't all that was in the bag.

"Huh? What's this?"

Aletta tilted her head slightly, noticing a silver tube she'd never seen before. It was warm to the touch.

"Oh, that? Just a little extra. Leftovers, actually. Hope you don't mind," answered the master. "If you could wash the container and bring it back next week, that'd be great. As for the dish inside..."

The word that came out of the master's mouth was the very first food Aletta had eaten at the Restaurant to Another World.

Sarah—a treasure hunter who mostly worked in and around the capital city—opened her eyes at the sweet scent coming into the kitchen. The room was bright.

With a treasure hunter's speed, Sarah figured out the situation immediately.

"Oh. I guess I must've fallen asleep before Aletta got back yesterday."

She wiped ink off her cheek with her hand, picking up the blanket that had fallen to the floor. Aletta had probably put the blanket on her while she slept.

Atop Sarah's usual work table were a bright magical lamp she generally used while exploring and a journal she'd read countless times. A bundle of parchment that Sarah had neatly written on also rested on the table.

All of these objects reflected her current work.



Not long ago, during a random visit to Nekoya, Sarah had reunited with her cousin for the first time in ten years. He had given her his journal.

Inside, penned in fresh ink, was information he'd gathered over the past decade about the Southern Continent.

Sarah had given the journal to her aunt and uncle, using it as proof that her cousin was still alive. They soon returned it to her, and she had taken up her current job.

Long story short, we can't read this, so could you reproduce it more neatly?

To some degree, Sarah understood the problem with the journal. To a treasure hunter, information was almost as important as one's own life. Sometimes, you had to protect that information, no matter what.

One of the simplest ways to do that was to record information in handwriting that was basically as hard to read as possible, so that no one else understood it.

Of course, you had to be careful not to write so messily that even you couldn't read it anymore. Generally speaking, however, the script in treasure hunters' journals was almost always difficult to read.

Sarah was the daughter of a massively prominent merchant, so she'd been educated properly and knew how to write in neat script. Still, even her journal was full of deliberately difficult-to-read text. It went without saying that her cousin, a more experienced treasure hunter, also took precautions. His writing was far messier than hers.

To make matters worse, he even used the same codes that their great-grandfather had enjoyed using. This meant that, even with the Gold family's connections, Sarah was the only one who could piece together her cousin's journal.

This led her to take the job from her aunt and uncle, especially since they'd never been afflicted with William's Curse. She would translate and reproduce the information that her cousin had left behind.

The reward for the task was no laughing matter, since Sarah's aunt and uncle were very well-off merchants who dealt in magical tools and items.

Furthermore, if Sarah reproduced the journal, she'd get her hands on information about the Southern Continent.

She'd accepted the gig immediately. For the last ten days, she'd holed up at home, copying the journal's contents in easy-to-read script.

"Agh! I'm hungry."

When Sarah remembered that the last meal she'd eaten was hard black bread, cheese, and water to wash it down, she left the room. Aletta was in the kitchen, stirring a large pot over a tiny lit stove. Her well-kept blonde hair swayed gently as she moved.

Aletta noticed Sarah standing at the kitchen door. Toasting some bread and cheese carefully, she turned and smiled at her boss.

"Ah, good morning! Breakfast will be ready soon, so just hang on a sec!"

"Thanks a lot. By the way... The soup in that pot there, is that...?"

Sarah hoped the sweet aroma coming from the pot was what she thought it was.

"Yup! The master gave me some corn potage yesterday. I'll pour you a bowl as well, Miss Sarah."

On top of Sarah's small table was breakfast for two. She and Aletta sat down at about the same time. Servants normally didn't dine with a house's master or mistress, but Sarah didn't really care about that sort of thing.

She actually preferred to eat with company, so on occasion, she and Aletta broke bread together.

"Once again, I thank you, oh god of demons, for this, my daily bread. I offer you my gratitude."

Aletta put her hands together and prayed, as she always did before eating. To hide her demon identity when she'd first come to the capital, she hadn't said grace. Now that that was no longer necessary, she was back in the habit of doing it.

Besides the last bit, the prayer tends to change occasionally. How interesting.

Sarah normally didn't register that Aletta was a demon, except at times like this, when her cousin prayed to the dark lord.

She'd never undergone any kind of education to become a priestess. She didn't know whether demons had a set prayer or not. She simply noticed that Aletta's prayers seemed to differ from day to day. Sticking to a strict prayer formula seemed like something demons might not do.

On the wooden plate was black bread that Aletta had toasted in the oven. Sarah began to eat.

Delish. Just toasting it makes a world of difference.

The surface was crunchy, and the wheat scent was delectable. Bread was best eaten fresh out of the oven, but toasting it like this was great in and of itself.

The black bread wasn't as good as the white bread Sarah ate with her family or at the restaurant. Still, it was scrumptious. None of the slices were burnt, although someone who didn't know what they were doing might've charred the bread.

After enjoying the toast by itself, Sarah layered toasted cheese atop a slice and took another bite.

The rich cheese's flavor made the bread that much more delicious. Since Sarah had become an adventurer, hard bread toasted with crunchy cheese melted over an open campfire had become a staple meal.

I would've liked to have some of that candied berry stuff...

It had been quite some time since they finished off the candied berries, which were sweet and sour, and paired magnificently with bread.

Sarah's little sister was evidently giving Aletta money to buy sweets for her at the Restaurant to Another World, so Sarah had decided to use her big sister card to take about half. Unfortunately, the candied berries had vanished in a flash. They apparently also weren't for sale, which meant that Aletta couldn't just buy more.

Now then.

After thoroughly enjoying her toast, Sarah turned to the yellow soup in the bowl—corn potage. Although the wooden bowl itself was cheap, Sarah nevertheless scooped the soup up gracefully. She brought it to her mouth and sipped quietly.

It's kind of sweet.

A sugary flavor made its way through her mouth. It was altogether different from a fruit's sweetness. Instead, the soup tasted like milk and one of the other world's vegetables. It created a sweet warmth that fell into Sarah's stomach.

Mmm... This is the perfect level of sweetness. Delicious.

When she'd still lived at home, Sarah had had trouble with desserts. They were so sweet that they made her teeth hurt and gave her a headache, so she rarely tried them. Later, she discovered that she was quite fond of milder sweetness.

The more Sarah sipped her soup, the more flavors she discovered hidden beneath the sweet surface taste. The salty soup had the smoothness of milk, the savory taste of oranie, and the complex flavor combinations found in all the restaurant's soups besides miso.

This time, Sarah was enjoying the soup on its own, not as a side dish with her minced meat cutlet. As she let it roll over her tongue, she recognized its quality.

Wait... No matter how you look at it, this soup isn't the sort of thing you'd just give away for free.

Sarah dipped some toast into the soup. The still-warm black bread soaked up the corn potage, entirely altering its flavor. Each bite of soft bread exploded with corn potage as soon as Sarah put it into her mouth. It was wonderful.

Yeah, this is dang good.

Having enjoyed the potage thoroughly, Sarah looked up and saw Aletta staring longingly at the remaining soup. The adventurer smiled and put down her spoon, grinning at the clearly relieved demon girl.

The corn potage was undoubtedly delicious, but she didn't mind letting her charming servant have the rest.

“Oh, that’s right! Did you buy what I asked for?”

“Yup! Minced meat sandwiches, right? I got them! I’ll serve them for lunch.”

Besides, Sarah had a feast waiting for her come lunchtime.

Chapter 77:

Three-Color Rice Bowl Oniwaka, a samurai and high priest who served the Goddess of Darkness, rubbed his full belly contentedly.

“Yeah, this place is wonderful. If it weren’t so out of the way, I’d visit regularly.”

The empty white plate in front of him had once contained cooked pork. Oniwaka had seen a hunter boy with a dog eat a plate of the stuff earlier, so he’d ordered the same thing.

Oniwaka thought back on the “ginger pork,” made of hog’s meat basted in juice and grated ginger, and on the delicious roast chicken the ogre couple had eaten with their drinks.

He sipped his glass of cold, fruity ice water. It was the perfect end to his meal, cooling his hot body. Although it was the middle of summer, the room’s temperature was closer to that of fall. It was enough to make Oniwaka forget the heat of the mountains.

Coupled with his full stomach, the restaurant made him feel as though he was at peace in the underworld.

“My word. This is why life is so fascinating.”

Oniwaka reflected on his luck. Preparing to face off against wraiths, he had come across an oak door while exploring the surrounding area.

Lush, seemingly endless summer weeds had hidden the door. Although it looked suspicious, Oniwaka crossed to the other side only to find a restaurant.

The restaurant existed in a strange other world and was full of unknown foods. Some kind of higher being had made the dining room’s corner its realm, so to speak. Even a high priest like Oniwaka felt like a tiny bug compared to such a being.

Mmm... I really should’ve brought Shoujirou with me, Oniwaka thought.

Shoujirou, an old samurai who followed Oniwaka, had thrown away his

earthly life to walk the path of God. He was probably still preparing for the aforementioned wraith extermination.

“No matter. I’ll bring him back something. Master!” Oniwaka called the master over. “I have a request.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Well, you see...”

Oniwaka asked the master for some help.

In a night camp just off a path deep in the mountains, Shoujirou readied himself. He placed seals containing the Goddess of Darkness’s blessings on his large spear, as well as on some arrows.

The goddess’s blessings included death and night. Thus, she was capable of overpowering and completely destroying undead monsters.

Shoujirou was tasked with guarding Oniwaka, who—despite his youth—had risen to the rank of high priest. The incredibly powerful seals he made strengthened Shoujirou’s already strong sword and arrows with lethal curses.

That’s about it.

Shoujirou brandished the heavy spear he’d used since he was young. He swung it around, making sure it felt right. His opponent, a wraith, was a particularly strong immortal monster.

Being ill-prepared would lead to death, so Shoujirou ensured that his weapons were in order.

About half a year ago, a story had spread from the Lord of Light’s shrine just off the road. A particularly lucky merchant, who’d managed to escape, had reported that a princess’s terrifying wraith lurked in the area. She only revealed herself during the full moon. Looking into old records revealed that the princess was related to the current lord of the land. She was an evil spirit many times more powerful than an average lich.

Priests and shrine maidens with Silver Sigils from the local Shrine of Light prepared and set off to take care of the wraith but met with failure. They barely managed to leave with their lives.

As far as the Lord of Light was concerned, the undead—beings of the darkness—were their mortal enemies. The shrine's single elder high priest declared that the wraith could not be allowed to exist in this world and put out a hundred-coin bounty in hopes of exterminating it.

This was where Oniwaka and Shoujiro came in.

He's late.

While Shoujiro prepared, Oniwaka had said he was going to look for food in the mountains and had left to explore the nearby area. He had yet to return.

No. I'm sure the young master is fine.

Shoujiro was a little concerned but collected himself. Having served as Oniwaka's bodyguard for a while now, Shoujiro knew full well what sort of person Oniwaka was, and the strength inside him.

Oniwaka was a high priest who worshiped the Goddess of Darkness and a samurai who'd learned the ways of the sword from Shoujiro himself. He was a capable warrior who could wield both dark magic and a sword, but that wasn't all. Oniwaka had ogre's blood flowing within him.

Among the sentient creatures on the planet were demi-humans, monsters considered barbaric and hostile toward humans. The horned demi-humans known as ogres lived in the Mountain Nation.

Ogres boasted frames close to twice the size of an average human and typically preyed on mountain beasts. Their strength eclipsed humans. They were faster than horses, and their skin was so hard that one would be forgiven for believing they were covered in armor. With those powerful bodies, ogres stole food, ate humans, and ravaged fields.

Nowadays, swords could cut through ogres' hard skin and bones, and heavy bows could pierce their stone-like skulls. Thanks to the talented samurai and martial artists who'd developed these weapons, humans could fight the ogres on equal footing. But just a few hundred years ago, the Mountain Nation's

citizens had lived in fear of ogres coming down from their homes and stealing the country's rice, livestock, and even young women. It was commonplace for villagers to abandon their fields altogether in fear for their lives.

Ogre children had been spoken of since that era.

Ogres kidnapped and ate humans. However, if the human happened to be a young woman, there were times when the ogre would let her live as their plaything. That might lead to her becoming pregnant with the ogre's child, eventually giving birth to babies that the ogres referred to as "hornless" and that humans called "ogre children." They were horrific, unwanted offspring.

The strong bodies ogre children were born with rivaled those of full-blood ogres. It wasn't uncommon in the Mountain Nation to hear stories of princesses, saved from ogres by samurai, who went on to birth ogre children. The children would eventually learn the way of the sword and become ogre hunters.

Oniwaka was an ogre child whose mother was the daughter of Shoujirou's previous master. Thought to have died in a landslide, the princess had actually been saved by an ogre and survived.

Three years later, a samurai extermination squad had slain the ogre. They found a young lady holding a baby in the cave where the beast had lived.

For the first time in three years, the princess returned to her father. However, she was weak from her life in the mountains. Her heart could no longer handle losing Oniwaka's father, and she succumbed to illness.

The young woman left Oniwaka behind, and he entered the Shrine of Darkness, along with the samurai who'd served as her bodyguard. After years of training, Oniwaka's abilities were finally recognized, and he officially became a high priest at a young age.

Oniwaka himself brought up the wraith extermination job. Wanting to sharpen his skills and broaden his knowledge, he'd set off on a journey around the nation. He discovered the gig after hearing rumors while stopping by a

town. Learning of the outrageous reward for the job, Oniwaka proposed that he and Shoujirou take it on. Like that, the pair found themselves beside the road on the day of the full moon.

Oniwaka really is late, though. If he doesn't come back, I must search for him myself.

Just as Shoujirou was considering going out to look for the young master, he returned.

“My bad! I found something cool and lost track of time.”

Having spent much of his life away from the samurai household, Oniwaka lacked his peers' formal tone.

“Huh. Something ‘cool’? What might that be?”

A wonderful aroma came from the object under Oniwaka's arm. Shoujirou glanced at the white bag, which was neither cloth nor paper.

“I found an otherworldly restaurant!” Oniwaka replied, smiling.

“A-an otherworldly restaurant, you say?”

“Yup! It was crazy delish!”

Shoujirou widened his eyes in stunned silence. Oniwaka, on the other hand, took a box from the white bag and showed it to his companion.

The delicious scent coming from whatever food was inside the box made Shoujirou's empty stomach growl. They'd left town before noon, so all he'd eaten was dried meat and rice and vegetable porridge.

“Well, I found a door that connects to this restaurant, right? I went through, but sadly, you can only use it once a week. The second I left, the door went ‘poof’!”

Oniwaka handed the paper box to his companion.

“What is this, Young Master?”

“I felt bad about being the only one who got to eat good food, so I asked the restaurant to put something together for you,” Oniwaka replied, without a care in the world. “It's a little cold, but I can guarantee its flavor,” he added with a

big smile. “I asked for something that’d taste great cold, after all!”

Rather than the face of an ogre child or a high priest, Oniwaka had the face of a young man who’d only just come of age.

Seeing this face, Shoujirou did his best to hold back tears. He decided to fill his stomach before the upcoming battle.

“I see. In that case, I’ll gladly accept this treat.”

Taking bamboo chopsticks from the small attached bag, he opened the box. The faint scent of rice and meat rose from within its still-warm interior.

“Wow. This is quite something.”

Shoujirou saw three colors inside the box—yellow egg, brown meat thinly sliced, and green beans boiled stalk and all.

“What is this dish called, Young Master?” Shoujirou asked Oniwaka. The delicious aroma and colorful food had piqued his interest.

Oniwaka repeated the name that the master had told him.

“Apparently, it’s called a ‘Three-Color Rice Bowl.’”

Shoujirou couldn’t hold back any longer. He lifted the heavy box to his face, plunging his chopsticks into the expanse of multicolored rice.

“Oh ho ho! This is top-quality rice, indeed.”

Shoujirou was something of a glutton. He was glad that there was nothing but pure white rice beneath the sea of colors. The grains were free of bran, clean, and carefully cooked—the sort of white rice that was popular among nobles.

“Right? Apparently, this rice is just normal over there,” Oniwaka said, almost proudly.

Shoujirou listened carefully. He picked up some rice and a piece of meat with his chopsticks, bringing them to his mouth.

“Ooh...!”

The old warrior couldn’t help letting out a gasp. The meat—fatty chicken to be precise—was seasoned with sugar and something like fish sauce.

What a sumptuous flavor.

The taste put a smile on Shoujirou's face. Even the food at the banquets during his samurai days couldn't have compared to this dish.

It was impossible to grow sugar in the Mountain Nation. The country's only sugar came from the sandy kingdom to the south or from the contemptible bordering nation. Sadly, this sugar was tremendously expensive and was only ever sold in the capital and a handful of larger towns. When it came to desserts, the Mountain Nation's options were seasonal fruit or sweet juice squeezed from grass that had absorbed the dew.

This meat had a succulent sweetness, but that wasn't all. The sugary taste brought out the rich flavor of the fat in the savory chicken skin, the sweet rice, and the unique, salty fish sauce. It was tremendous.

Shoujirou straightened his back instinctively, beginning to eat slower. Simply shoveling the food into his mouth would be a waste.

Next is... Hrm. These are no ordinary scrambled eggs.

An artisan's touch had even been applied to the yellow scrambled eggs.

It was a fact that eggs were delicious. Commoners far and wide considered any egg recipe a delight—boiled, fried, salted. But these were so much more.

Hmm... Have these been mixed with fish stock? There's no muddy odor.

The scrambled eggs contained salt and, once again, sugar. Naturally, they tasted both sweet and salty. However, they included another savory flavor altogether different from the other two.

It was similar to the taste of a fish caught in a river, broiled, and marinated in alcohol. But in this case, there was no fishy smell. Instead, the flavor was simply savory.

This, too, paired well with the white rice. The eggs had a lighter flavor than the chicken—a refreshing taste for the tongue, once it had gotten used to the chicken's sweet, greasy flavor.

Hrm. And these are just salted.

Last but not least, Shoujirou directed his chopsticks to the green beans, which

had been boiled in their pods.

They mostly tasted like beans, although they had a slightly salty flavor.

But the mouthfeel is just right.

The boiled green beans had their own unique texture. Shoujiro enjoyed their crunchiness, and the sound the pods made in his teeth.

They were entirely different from the tender chicken and scrambled eggs. With each bite, salty bean juice oozed into his mouth.

It was extremely satisfying.

Eventually, Shoujiro fell silent, patiently enjoying each bite of the three colors in his bowl.

Rushing through the meal would be a waste, but he couldn't help wanting to keep the food coming. So, with each bite, his chopsticks moved faster.

Oniwaka, watching his companion dig into the meal voraciously, could hold back no longer. He pouted like a child as he asked for some food.

"Hey... Let me have some."

Shoujiro took his time to reply.

"Fine... But only a little."

Oniwaka and Shoujiro conversed as they watched the sun slowly set, their battle preparations largely completed.

"How'd prep go? We looking good?"

"But of course."

After finishing the delicious food, both men felt energized. All that was left was to defeat the wraith and claim their reward.

"Next time I drop by that place, I'll take you with me."

"You have my gratitude. I'd love to accompany you."

The surrogate father and son would go together.

As the sun set behind the mountains, Oniwaka braced himself.

A cold breeze carrying the scent of death blew past, and the pair drew their swords.



Chapter 78:

Barbecue, Once More Western Cuisine Nekoya was closed for the Obon holiday.

Every year in August, the restaurant shut its doors for a full week.

This was partly due to the fact that Nekoya primarily served the area's office workers. Since those workers were off work, there was little business during that period.

Nekoya was also an old restaurant. The previous master had believed that Obon and the New Year were times when one should rest. The current master felt the same way.

Still, Western Cuisine Nekoya had a tradition of serving a special dish before Obon started.

The price—twelve hundred yen—was a little higher than the typical one-thousand-yen lunch limit. However, the Obon feature was all-you-can-eat, so it was the sort of special menu option that Nekoya could only offer once a year during a festive time like this. Otherwise, the restaurant would have been firmly in the red (though customers would have walked away happy).

Long before the current master was born, there had been some kind of supply mistake, and the restaurant accidentally ordered more ingredients than it could handle. This was before Nekoya really had money, so the incident nearly caused the restaurant to close its doors. The master's grandmother had been in charge of finances at the time. She'd apparently berated the previous master, who'd made the initial mistake. He'd laughed it off.

This had been just before Obon, back when the notion of taking the holidays off was more prevalent. Nekoya's fridge was also much smaller back then. The restaurant got almost no customers during the holiday, which meant that they had no way of dealing with the overstocked food. The previous master had held his head in his hands in total despair.

After pulling his hair out all night trying to figure out how to get rid of the extra food, he came up with a plan and put out a sign.

Barbecue special today! Meat and vegetables are all-you-can-eat for the regular price!

The day the previous master unveiled this plan, the number of visitors to Nekoya surged. They somehow managed to sell out of all the extra food in two days flat. The restaurant barely made a profit, since the guests were after the cheap meat and shrimp, but the master was just happy not to have wasted the food.

The next year, customers came to him asking if he was planning another barbecue special, which forced him to repeat the event. He'd trapped himself.

Customers looked forward to the barbecue, even when the previous master raised its price to twelve hundred yen.

So, once a year, Western Cuisine Nekoya held a special two-day event. On the Friday just before Obon, and the Saturday after, the master offered barbecue to the inhabitants of both his world and the other.

This year, that Saturday morning had rolled around yet again. The master got himself pumped up.

"Time to grind."

Friday had been a battlefield.

During the day, students on break had wandered in to eat all they could. At night, crowds of office workers made their way to the restaurant. The rush lasted from the second the master opened Nekoya's doors to the moment he closed them.

The master, who was now six years into his thirties, hadn't made it through that business unharmed. Truth be told, he really needed a break.

As far as he was concerned, however, he'd have a full week off starting the next day. When he thought of it that way, the barbecue was no sweat.

And so he cut the meat, washed the vegetables, and prepared the fish.

"Good morning, Master!"

“I’m actually tied up right now, so hop in the shower and grab a bite. Your sandwich is right over there. I’m done with Kuro’s curry, too.”

Although Aletta and Kuro had arrived, the master couldn’t afford to stop working.

There were fewer customers on Saturday compared to Friday, but there were also fewer staff. Things had gotten better since Aletta and Kuro had joined Nekoya as waitresses, but the master still had to handle the cooking on his own.

“All right. That should do it.”

Just as the master finished prepping, the sound of bells ringing signaled the arrival of customers and the beginning of the battle to end all battles.

Ellen’s smile deepened after she heard that the barbecue special was today. Her prediction was right on the mark.

“Oh! So, it is today, then!”

She met Herman’s eyes, and they smiled at one another. Her two children, Kai and Bona, also smiled.

Once a year, during the summer, barbecue was served on a Day of Satur.

Ellen had been a customer at the Restaurant to Another World for over ten years. After coincidentally visiting the restaurant on that specific Day of Satur multiple times, she was now able to predict when it would happen.

“Yeah, just like I thought. Well then, we’ll have four orders of barbecue. And...”

“Beer! I want beer!”

“Mom, I want cola!”

“Me tooooooo!”

Excited about the special festival that only happened once a year, Herman and the kids called out their desired drinks.

Usually, Ellen would have immediately turned down these requests, but today was the annual barbecue. Just this once, she was more than happy to let the

others indulge. Even she wanted to enjoy herself as much as possible.

“I know, I know.” She turned to the waitress. “Sorry about that. Can I get two beers and two colas, please?”

“No problem! Thank you very much.” Then the waitress asked Ellen and her family what food they preferred. “For the barbecue, you can pick what you want cooked. What would you like me to bring first?”

“Beef and pork. Oh, and chicken thighs, too. All with barbecue sauce, of course. Thanks,” Ellen replied with a smile.

This was what the special meant to Ellen and her family. Barbecue went hand in hand with delicious meat.

The relatively high price was a single silver coin per person. In exchange, however, you received refills of not just bread, rice, and soup, but even the main dish itself. Admission was worth it.

The draw was, in particular, the meat—an ingredient that wasn’t very accessible in the other world. The barbecue was a chance to eat as much of the Restaurant to Another World’s top-quality meat as you wanted. To Ellen and her family, it was basically a festival.

A little while later, the master brought a large plate out from the back. It held enough barbecue for four people.

“Sorry about the wait. Here’s your barbecue.”

Due to the sheer amount of food and drink, the waitress carried the drink tray.

“I have your drinks, too.”

They lined everything up on the table.

The rich aroma of cooked meat and slightly toasted barbecue sauce filled the air around Ellen’s family, making them all gulp in response. It was time to dig in.

The beef was loaded onto a skewer with oranie, while the pork occupied its own skewer. The chicken thighs were evenly cooked.

Ellen picked up the beef skewer, and the aroma of beef engulfed her. She could no longer restrain herself.

Wow...

The second she bit into the meat, juices, fat, and the barbecue sauce's sweet and sour flavor exploded in her mouth.

The meat here never stops being delicious.

Ellen unconsciously narrowed her eyes.

This barbecue stuff was completely incredible. The sweet and sour sauce was flavorful, and the meat's crisp surface hid the bits cooked to perfection within. The beef was particularly tender and lacked the scent of milk. Its juices poured into her mouth with each bite. It was so incredible that Ellen questioned whether the cows she knew were really the same animal.

How do you raise those beasts to end up this tasty? Geez.

To Ellen, beef was a food eaten during the Fall Fertility Festival.

The annual festival was held once the crops had been safely harvested. Every year at that time, the common folk offered their gratitude to the Lord of Earth and cooked beef.

They slaughtered old cows who couldn't move and cows who could no longer produce milk, cooked them whole, and ate them.

Since Ellen and her family rarely had the opportunity to eat meat, the Fall Fertility Festival was a feast that everyone looked forward to. However, the reality was that the meat was a bit too tough for the elderly to chew, and it had a, let's say, *unique* aroma. At the end of the day, that beef just wasn't as good as pork raised specifically for food. Ellen and the others had come to this conclusion long ago.

However, the beef at the restaurant was completely different. It more than held its own against pork, lacking the stench of cow while also tickling the taste buds. Once you started eating Nekoya's beef, you couldn't stop until you were finished.

Crunchy, spicy, cooked oranie was skewered between the pieces of beef,

cleansing the palate after each slice of meat. Before Ellen knew it, she'd finished an entire beef and oranie skewer and was reaching for her beer.

The refreshingly cold bitterness flowed down her throat, washing away the meat's taste.

Ellen let out a satisfied sigh, looking at the other three, who were doing the same.

What's this? I guess we're pretty alike.

"Hey, Mom. You need to try this pork. It's damn good. Here, here."

After taking a breather, Herman picked up another pork skewer.

The barbecue pork was edged with white, translucent fat that looked as though it might drip off at any moment. Unlike the beef and oranie skewer, this skewer contained only cooked pork.

As soon as Ellen bit into the marbled meat, sweet juices spilled out. They fused with the barbecue sauce's sweet and salty flavor, making the dish truly magnificent.

"Mom, the chicken thighs are super-duper delicious!"

"Try some! They really are!"

Normally, chicken thighs basted in barbecue sauce and cooked to perfection were sold as roasted chicken. Unlike the beef and pork, the chicken meat itself absorbed the barbecue sauce. On top of that, the skewer included the chicken's crispy skin, tender thigh meat, and crunchy bits around the bone.

One experienced various textures when eating a chicken thigh, making it the children's favorite meat dish.

"Yes, yes, give me a second. Let's see. Ah... You kids should also try the beef. It's wonderful. Completely different from the stuff at the fall festival."

For Ellen and her family, barbecue meant indulging in as much meat as they could.

Elsewhere, two men indulged in the same meat in completely different ways.

They were so far apart in age that they could have been father and son, and they had two dogs with them.

“So? What do ya think of this barbecue?”

“It’s crazy good. Wait... Can we seriously eat as much as we want for one silver coin?”

“Indeed we can,” the older man, Mashira, explained to his disciple, Yuuto. “Alcohol and soft drinks aren’t included, though. C’mon, let’s dig in. Meat and rice.”

Mashira was a seasoned hunter. He patted the heads of the two hunting dogs voraciously digging into their own unsalted cooked meat, wagging their tails back and forth.

“Yes, of course!”

Yuuto nodded intensely at his master. In his left hand was a skewer of meat, in his right a pair of chopsticks. He dug in immediately, removing the sweet, salty pork cooked with soy sauce and sugar from the skewer and placing it atop his rice.

Fat and juices dripped onto the sweet white rice.

As Yuuto expected, the flavors paired perfectly, making a dish that he felt he could eat forever.

“The rice here is just the best. I could live off this stuff!”

Mashira nodded in response to his disciple’s words. “Agreed. I honestly don’t know whether I come here for the meat or the rice anymore. Ha ha ha!”

Nekoya’s meat dishes were indeed incredible. The ginger pork, the square-simmered pork the older samurai had recommended, and the barbecue they were eating that day—Mashira felt that each and every dish was above and beyond the best that the Mountain Nation offered.

The white rice at the Restaurant to Another World, however, was even better. It was fundamentally different from the rice the Mountain Nation grew.

Since they were hunters, Yuuto and Mashira often had the opportunity to indulge in meat. So it made sense that they were so entranced by the

restaurant's rice.

Mashira inhaled the sweet steam coming off the rice, enjoying the aroma.

I'll never get enough of this scent.

That aroma alone made him feel like, despite how much meat and rice he'd already eaten, he could still go for more. It was a mysterious sensation.

I ain't about to lose to no youngster just yet. I can keep going!

Mashira grabbed his chopsticks, refusing to lag behind his disciple, who was putting away meat and rice at a furious speed.

Fardania, an elf on a journey, cut gently into her food with her fork and carried it to her mouth. It was delicious, as usual.

Curses... She grimaced. All he did was cook it. How can this meranza be so delicious?

With that thought running through her head, Fardania proceeded to eat her fifth meranza—eggplant in the other world—of the day.

Its green pulp was incredibly savory. The taste of the meranza itself merged with the flavors of the spicy grated ginger, the soy sauce it had absorbed, and the delicious shredded kombu sprinkled on top, making it the juiciest vegetable imaginable.

Its purple skin peeled away to reveal bright green insides. Meranza was a fat summer vegetable, and its rich pulp was tender. It was delicious in soup, since it absorbed the broth, and it could be salted and cooked as well.

However, salted meranza wouldn't have been enough to get Fardania to order seconds, thirds, fourths, and fifths.

Soy sauce is seriously cheating. If I had this stuff, I could make all sorts of delicious things.

Fardania glanced at her pupil, who was digging into a cob of sweet yellow corn.

Alice, the young elf child, was focused entirely on chewing the kernels on the

fat cob. She'd apparently taken a liking to the vegetable.

When she bit into the freshly cooked, aromatic corn, it overflowed with sweet juice.

What made the corn even tastier, though, was the soy sauce's salty flavor.

Its unique aroma and salinity combined elegantly with the corn's sweetness, making the vegetable that much more appetizing and grabbing hold of Alice's appetite.

"Excuse me, miss. Can I get another cob, please?"

Alice no longer ordered shiitake mushrooms, sliced orange, or cobbler's tubers like she used to. She just kept ordering more corn.

This shredded kombu stuff is cheating, too.

Fardania used her fork to lift some of the shredded greens to eye level, as if examining them up close.

The master had explained that the kombu replaced another ingredient.

"I'd normally use bonito flakes on this, but I know you don't like fishy-smelling stuff."

To Fardania, the savory mass of the strange "kombu" tasted faintly of the sea.

I wonder if Camilla knows what this stuff is.

Taking in the scent of the ocean, Fardania glanced at the witch who lived in the seaside town. This very same witch had invited Fardania and Alice to the Restaurant to Another World that day.

Camilla sold all kinds of medicines to the town's citizens. She called herself the Witch of the Sea so, as expected, she was knowledgeable about the ocean. Therefore, Fardania hoped she might get some answers from Camilla.

"Ah, yes. The kombu doesn't appear to be freshly picked. Still, it seems as though he's making sure to store it somewhere cold so that it doesn't rot. It looks quite delicious, actually."

Camilla was munching some seafood she'd ordered.

Round shrimp, kraken cut into large chunks, and scallops in their shells had

been stabbed onto a skewer and cooked in soy sauce.

With each bite, the shripe pushed back satisfyingly against Camilla's teeth. The chewy krakeen felt good to munch on. The scallops' shells loosened in her mouth. Their mantles had a unique mouthfeel all their own.

Each piece was bathed in soy sauce, a liquid that closely resembled the fish sauce used by those who lived on the Western Continent's shoreline. Wrapped in the sauce's slightly cooked aroma, the skewer didn't lose out to the seafood that Camilla took directly from the ocean floor. To her surprise, the shripe, krakeen, and scallops all seemed quite well preserved. There was no scarring or anything of the sort, and they had an aroma that made her want to keep eating.

"Hey, Camilla..."

As she enjoyed her food, she heard a voice call out to her.

"What is it, Fardania?"

Camilla stopped her fork and looked at Fardania, the long-eared descendent of elf invaders, who'd recently come to Camilla's abode asking about fruit jelly.

Long, long ago, years before even Camilla herself was born, invaders had come from the continent north of the Lord of Blue.

They were barbarians who lumped the Ancient Six together with the enemy of all living things, the Million Colors of Chaos, calling them the Seven Overlords. Just one of the invader's mages could take down a high priest or priestess with their incredible magic. The prideful creatures claimed the world was theirs, attacking the land of the Ancient Six's children.

That was all in the past, however. Humanity now greatly outnumbered the invaders, so they lacked the overwhelming pride they'd once had and led quiet lives in small villages in the forest.

Since the Lord of Blue's citizens lived in the ocean, they didn't have much contact with the continent's elven invaders. Thus, Camilla didn't really hate elves. That was why she could accompany them as she was doing now.

"So, I'm assuming this stuff on the top is some kind of sea herb, but I would love some specifics." said Fardania.

“Let me see... Don’t mind me. I’m just going to take a quick taste.”

Camilla directed her fork to the bright green vegetable that Fardania had been devouring fervently up until that moment.

“Mmm... Yes, this is probably an herb.”

Fardania made sure to keep her ears wide open to avoid missing Camilla’s explanation of what, exactly, the green herb was.

Night came, and after seeing off the last customer of the evening, the master sat down.

Tired words left his lips. “It’s finally over...”

The master felt as though this annual barbecue only got harder with every year. It was an unfortunate reminder that he wasn’t getting any younger.

The day had been incredibly busy. The customers who came to Nekoya in the evening, usually in search of a drink, immediately ordered plate after plate of barbecue after hearing what day it was. Even the last customer, a demon woman who always ordered beef stew, asked for “just a taste.” She’d then proceeded to eat the remaining barbecue—enough for five people.

“But I can really take it easy tomorrow, at least.”

The master had gotten through the hard part. Starting tomorrow, he’d be able to relax all the way through the following Saturday.

As he started preparing the barbecue he’d set aside for himself and his waitresses, the master thought, *What should I do this year?*

Chapter 79:

Cheese Chicken Cutlet **Gerhard Hepken**, lord of a small area of land, first discovered the door while visiting the previous lord, his grandfather-in-law. The former lord's secondary residence, a small cabin, wasn't at all fitting of that aristocratic status.

Gerhard was the fifth son in a family of knights. After learning the ways of the sword at home, he'd left to become an adventurer.

He and his comrades had done incredible things—exterminating monsters, exploring ruins, protecting towns from bandits, and even foiling a conspiracy involving an entire nation. At the end of their long journey, they'd put their powers together and defeated the troll king, leader of dozens of orcs and over a hundred goblins.

At the end of that battle, after discussing it with his comrades, Gerhard had retired from the adventurer's life. The man who would eventually become his grandfather-in-law had seen the amazing skills and worldly knowledge Gerhard had gained from leaving behind his old life.

By the time he met Gerhard, the older man could no longer stand. He was already dying of a disease that even a high priest couldn't heal. His son had left behind a daughter, Claudia, and the old man hoped that Gerhard might take her to be his wife. Gerhard agreed.

Not long after that, the old man passed on peacefully, as if satisfied to have seen his granddaughter marry. Gerhard took his place as the lord of the land. He listened to the voices of his people, held banquets for nobles and merchants, and spent hours knee-deep in all sorts of paperwork.

Although swordplay was no longer required of him, he made sure not to let up on his training. He ran up hills and mountains to strengthen his legs and swung his blade to and fro to ensure that his swordsmanship didn't rust.

Excellent... I can see it.

After running a long way from the castle—a distance one would usually cover

on horseback—Gerhard saw his destination, a small but well-constructed manor.

He'd found the manor while running. It belonged to Claudia's beloved grandfather, the land's previous lord. He'd built the mansion far away from the castle, and it was Gerhard's objective during his morning run.

The door was unlocked so that travelers could use it. Gerhard passed through, taking a breath as he slipped his shirt off and wiped down his sweat-covered body. Then he grabbed the leather canteen at his waist and took a sip of the cool water.

The delicious water was just the thing his dehydrated body needed, cooling him down significantly. Letting out a satisfied sigh, Gerhard noticed something.

Hm...? I don't recall that being here.

His eyes settled on a door with a cat decoration. It was clearly well crafted, which was bizarre, considering few people had visited this building since the previous lord had passed away. Everything was covered in a layer of dust.

Fascinating...

The former adventurer's curiosity drove him to put his hand on the door, but he reconsidered. He decided that, for now, he would simply make a mental note of the door's existence.

Gerhard had become an adventurer under the guise of martial arts training. He knew that, even if he found something mysterious, he mustn't touch it. Information-gathering was priority number one.

Gerhard had once accidentally touched a door while examining elven ruins. This had caused the door to shoot out poison darts, paralyzing him. While a priest treated him, another treasure hunter had given him the advice above.

I should ask Claudia about this, Gerhard thought.

His grandfather-in-law had built the mansion. Surely that man's granddaughter, Claudia, would know something.

The matter settled, Gerhard put his shirt back on and ran outside.

Gerhard discovered the door's true nature over breakfast.

"Oh, my! You found a Door of Nekoya?!"

Gerhard's young wife, Claudia, had not yet turned twenty. In response to his question, she raised her voice in a manner he could hardly believe, considering how quiet she usually was.

"There was indeed a door, but... Nekoya, you say? What do you know about it?"

"I went through that door before, back when my father and mother were still alive."

Claudia looked into the distance as she spoke of her parents.

Apparently, Nekoya was an otherworldly restaurant that Claudia's grandfather had found back when he was still spry, long before she was born.

Customers from all over the world visited the restaurant on the other side of the mysterious door. The food was supposedly delectable.

"After Mother and Father passed away, Grandfather stopped visiting Nekoya. I was still quite young... I never knew where the door was located."

"Huh. Shall we go take a look?"

"I'd love that!" Gerhard's wife was still young, and she replied to his offer with a tearful smile. It made Gerhard's heart skip a beat.

"Then get ready to leave. I'll go change, too." He coughed lightly, trying to cover for how nervous he was.

Gerhard exited the room quickly and began to change into his knight gear.

By the time the couple arrived at the door, the sun was directly above them in the sky.

"Ah, that's right! There was a door in the second residence."

Claudia's arms wrapped firmly around Gerhard's waist as they sat atop their horse. There was a tinge of nostalgia to the young lady's words. She remembered how, when she was little, she'd ridden in a carriage driven by an

older gentleman. Along with her kind parents and normally strict grandfather, they'd come to this door to grab a delicious bite to eat.

"Now, this way. Take my hand."

Gerhard helped Claudia down and tied the horse to a nearby tree. Holding hands, they opened the door to the mansion.

The moment they entered, Gerhard's fear that he might have been seeing things vanished entirely. The Door of Nekoya was exactly where he'd last spotted it.

Thank goodness. I don't know what I would have done if it were an illusion.

Making sure not to let the relief show on his face, Gerhard spoke to Claudia. "Shall we?"

"Yes!"

He put his hand on the door handle and turned it.

The cozy sound of bells ringing ushered the pair into Nekoya, turning them into customers. This was Gerhard's first visit, and for Claudia, it was a homecoming many years in the making.

Since it was noon, the place was packed with all sorts of customers enjoying all sorts of food. Thanks to his travels, Gerhard's knowledge was much vaster than the average person's. Even so, sights he almost couldn't comprehend confronted him as his eyes darted around the room.

So, this is another world, eh?

Gerhard saw citizens of both the Eastern Continent and Western Continents, neither of which were particularly rare in the Kingdom or Empire.

But there were also dwarves, elves, halflings, and even monsters.

At this time of day, Nekoya was filled with all kinds of customers, and they were all eating unfamiliar foods. Claudia gripped Gerhard's hand, apparently scared by the sight of the large lizardman sitting near the entrance.

Gerhard squeezed Claudia's hand in return and then smiled at her, hoping to

calm her.

“Don’t worry. I don’t sense any ill intent.”

“All right...”

Her face turned bright red, and she looked down quickly.

Her frazzled reaction made Gerhard blush as well. He quickly spotted an open table and sat down with Claudia.

“Hi! Welcome to Western Cuisine Nekoya!”

As soon as they’d sat, the demon girl carrying food to and fro came over, greeting the pair with glasses of ice water.

“This is your first time here, right? Um, we have menus with all the dishes listed, but they’re written in Eastern Continent script. Can you read?”

“Yes, I can. Could you bring us one?” Gerhard nodded, signaling her to bring a menu.

It didn’t take long for the waitress to return.

In the strangely smooth book, someone with absolutely superb penmanship had written a list of dishes and drinks.

Huh. This is quite the lineup.

Each menu item had a simple description. Gerhard spotted several that seemed to be dishes he’d eaten in the Empire. Most of them, however, were things he couldn’t even imagine.

“What do you think, Claudia? Is there anything you’d like to eat?” Unsure of what to order, Gerhard turned to his wife, who’d been to the restaurant before.

“Let’s see. Ah... This.” She pointed to one of the dishes on the menu. “I’m fairly certain this is it. Mother and Father used to eat this often. So, I—”

“Then we shall have it.”

Deciding to order the dish that Claudia had pointed out, Gerhard called the waitress. She came by the table quickly.

“Young lady, we’d like to place an order.”

“Oh, of course! What would you like?”

“We’ll have two of these cheese chicken cutlets. Also...”

Gerhard intended to order some wine, but he was beaten to the punch.

“Two beers, please!”

Claudia usually wasn’t very assertive, so her request surprised her husband.

“Absolutely! So, that’s two beers and two cheese chicken cutlets? Those’ll be right out!”

Confirming their order, the waitress left to deliver the information to the kitchen.

Claudia blushed as she explained her drink order to her husband, who looked as though he’d just seen something impossible.

“Um, Mother and Father always ordered beer with their cutlets. The sage said that it’s the best way to enjoy a cutlet, too.”

“I see,” Gerhard said, delighted by his wife’s exuberance. “In that case, I look forward to it!”

Patiently, he waited for his food.

The couple sampled the top-quality white bread and soup while they waited and marveled at the bright light coming from the ceiling of the mysterious, windowless room.

Claudia spoke of memories she recalled from the restaurant as a child. In turn, Gerhard told stories of his time as an adventurer.

They chatted and relaxed, paying no mind to the monsters in the room with them. They simply waited for the cheese chicken cutlets, which Claudia remembered as “terribly delicious.”

As the enjoyable conversation rolled by, they occasionally glanced toward the kitchen. Finally, the time arrived. The waitress appeared holding two plates of food and two beers.

“Sorry for the wait. Here are your beers and cheese chicken cutlets.”

She set the dishes down gently on the table in front of the couple, then placed two large mugs of golden ale next to them.

Wedge-shaped yellow fruits, thinly cut leafy greens, and some kind of red fruit decorated the white plates. In the center of each was a large piece of brown meat.

It was larger than Gerhard's palm and still producing heat. In fact, he could hear it sizzling.

The waitress who brought their meals offered a few helpful tips.

"Use the sauce in the blue bottle over there to give it extra flavor. Oh, and I recommend squeezing the lemon over the meat. The juice makes it extra delicious. Take your time and enjoy!"

The couple dug in. According to the description in the menu, cheese chicken cutlet was a chicken breast with cheese sandwiched between the meat and a layer of breadcrumbs, fried in oil.

The first thing Gerhard had thought of after reading that description was the Empire's croquettes.

Croquettes were a popular food made by mashing cobbler's tubers, breading them, and frying them. Everyone from nobility to the commoners enjoyed them.

The imperial capital, like the royal capital, was full of adventurers. In that city, it was common to find stalls by the dozens, selling croquettes to passersby. They were dry and fairly tasteless, aside from their slight salty flavor. Still, a hot, fresh croquette paired amazingly with cheap ale. Or, at least, that was how Gerhard remembered it.

Thinking back on his time as an adventurer nostalgically, Gerhard cut a piece of cheese chicken cutlet, stabbed it with his fork, and brought it to his mouth.

Mmm?!

It only took one bite for Gerhard to realize that he was dealing with something special. The satisfyingly crunchy breading made a delightful sound as it broke apart in his mouth, revealing the bread and oil's refined flavors.

Chicken breast typically went bad quickly, making it hard to preserve. This meat, however, was amazing—tender, salted, and spiced. Each bite revealed the juices hidden within.

There was a layer of delicious cheese atop the blindingly white chicken breast. It was clear that the cheese had been selected specifically because its quality matched the chicken's. The heat coming off the meat melted the cheese, which fell off the chicken breast's edges.

The cheese had a strong taste. Paired with the relatively lean chicken breast, it increased the meat's delicious flavor.

This is...absolutely incredible.

Gerhard reached for his beer and sipped without a second thought. The intensely bitter flavor and ice-cold temperature reminded him of winter as it washed down his throat, cooling his tongue, which the cheese chicken cutlet had warmed.

This ale's something else, too. It isn't just a delight for the tongue but the throat as well. I see the sage was correct.

Gerhard had inadvertently downed more than half of his massive mug. The combination of the cheese chicken cutlet and beer was tremendously delicious.

"Pwaaaah..."

As Gerhard let out a breath, he heard the exact same sound from beside him.

Turning to look at Claudia, he discovered that she, too, had just indulged in her beer. In fact, she'd drunk even more than he had.

Gerhard's wife normally had a more ladylike demeanor. But when presented with the delicious meal and drink she remembered from her childhood, she couldn't help but guzzle them down.

"Um, I..." Noticing her husband looking at her, Claudia blushed once again and directed her gaze downward.

Gerhard found this adorable and quickly carried things forward. "We should order more beer before we run out. Oh, and I'd like to try this sauce, too."

He took the blue bottle off the table and tilted it over his food. Some kind of

thick, brown liquid came out from inside. It slowly dribbled over the cheese chicken cutlet, staining the breading brown as well.

Next was the lemon. Gerhard squeezed the wedge over his chicken, dripping its juice onto the meat.

“Now, let’s see...”

With one bite, Gerhard was rendered speechless.

How could this be? How could this deliciousness be real?!

The salty sauce and intensely sour lemon pushed the cheese chicken cutlet to the pinnacle of perfection.

On their own, the two new ingredients would be too strong to taste any good. With the cheese and meat juices, however, they became a gentle addition that increased the other flavors.

“Excuse me!” Gerhard said to the waitress. “Could we each get another beer?”

Seeing her husband Gerhard enjoy his cheese chicken cutlet and beer, Claudia decided to do the same. She followed up his request by making another order herself.

“Um, another cheese chicken cutlet, please!”

The pair enjoyed their lunch together, eating until they were stuffed.

As the sun fell, the couple returned to the mansion.

“I might’ve eaten a bit too much.”

“Me, too.”

Their stomachs were so full that it was almost painful. It might have proven difficult to ride home on horseback right away.

Instead, they leaned against the wall and relaxed for a while, waiting for their meals to settle.

“We must come here again,” Gerhard said. “I’m quite fond of their food.”

Claudia responded with a bright smile and a nod.

“I’d love that.”

Chapter 80:

Pork Loin Cutlet Hearing her taxi stop, Koyomi opened her eyes. She'd been thinking back on her long, long journey.

"We're here, ma'am. The Nekoya Building near the shopping district, right?"

The cab driver smiled as he spoke.

"Yes... That's right. Thank you."

Coming to her senses, Koyomi looked out the window at the familiar building. She thanked the driver, pulled her wallet from her bag with her wrinkled hand, and passed him some money.

"Much obliged. Here's your change."

The driver, a true professional, handed Koyomi the coins and opened the door for her.

"Please consider driving with us again."

Making sure that Koyomi had exited the taxi, the driver quickly pulled away. Koyomi watched the cab leave and then narrowed her eyes at the building in front of her.

It hasn't changed at all.

Despite its name, the small structure's most identifiable trait was the "Flying Puppy" sign on the first floor.

Koyomi gazed at the building nostalgically. Not a single thing had been altered since Daiki had passed away over ten years ago.

Walking down the basement steps, she found a familiar door illustrated with a cat, as well as a nearby sign that read, *Closed for today. Please visit us again.*

Koyomi pulled out the door's key and slowly turned the handle. With an unlocking noise, the magic tool connected to the door temporarily deactivated.

Now then, time to head in.

The nostalgic sound of the door opening filled Koyomi's ears.

This really is the Restaurant to Another World.

Koyomi let the unique atmosphere wash over her. Her eyes scanned the room. She spotted something and immediately froze.

That idiot grandson of mine. What in heaven's name did he summon?!

Koyomi held her breath, eyes locked on the being with the impossibly humble presence. A regular person would have been incapable of even perceiving the creature.

At first glance, it appeared to be a young elf girl with pitch-black hair, wearing a black waitress uniform. She carried food across the room quickly and gracefully.

Koyomi kept her guard up. She knew the creature was no elf.

That thing is on the same level as Red.

Several years after the Restaurant to Another World opened, a red monster had appeared there. Koyomi was certain that the beast in front of her was of the same ilk. It was something she could never defeat.

If I make the wrong move, Nekoya...no...the entirety of Japan will be finished.

Fortunately, Black appeared to have no ill intentions and didn't pay her any mind. It simply continued doing its job.

Figuring it was safer not to engage at all, Koyomi decided to ignore the creature. She just wished her grandson would minimize the surprises. She was in her twilight years, after all.

Oh... I mustn't forget to return the door to normal.

If she didn't, who could tell what Black might do? Slightly panicked, Koyomi placed her hand on the doorknob gently, activating its magic.

Immediately after casting the spell, Koyomi heard a voice call out to her.

"Welcome, ma'am! Is this your first time here?"

Koyomi would never have mistaken the horned blonde girl wearing Nekoya's waitress uniform for anything but a demon—the very same race that Koyomi had killed hundreds, maybe thousands of. Reeling from the day's second

surprise, Koyomi mustered a smile.

“Oh, I’m...fine.” she replied. “This isn’t my first time here. It’s just...been a while, is all. I was surprised by how much has changed.”

Koyomi’s grandson had inherited Daiki’s cooking skills but not her swordsmanship. Nevertheless, Koyomi’s blood flowed through his veins, so it was incredible how poorly he seemed to sense danger. It worried her.

“Let me take you to your...”

“No need for that, young lady.”

Koyomi shook her head slightly and walked toward an old man sitting in the corner.

“Might I sit here, Pork Loin Cutlet?”

She flashed a smile at the old man enjoying his usual with a mug of beer.

His eyes opened wide. “Yomi...? You’re still...?”

It was his old comrade-in-arms. Some seventy years ago, they’d parted ways, only to reunite thirty years back. Then, a decade ago, she’d disappeared. He was obviously shocked by her sudden presence.

“Of course you can... Come, sit. Let’s enjoy ourselves.”

“You have my thanks.”

Sitting down with her old friend, Koyomi gave the demon girl her order.

“Pork loin cutlet with a large rice, please.”

That was the very first meal that Koyomi had eaten in this world. Even now, she truly believed it to be the absolute best.

“O-of course. One moment, please.”

Collecting Koyomi’s order, the demon girl ran to the kitchen right away. She seemed scared. Perhaps she sensed the overwhelming pressure and quiet, antagonistic intent dripping from Koyomi.

“Now, now. Take it easy on the lass. Times have changed,” Pork Loin Cutlet warned his old friend, smirking.

“You’re right. I know. A lot has changed over there, eh?”

Koyomi was only familiar with the state of the world at the end of the great demon war.

In other words, she knew demons only as evil beings who needed to be struck down. She found it strange that a demon was working peacefully at the restaurant.

This reminded Koyomi that the seventy years she’d spent in this world were long ones, especially for someone whose entire vocation was killing demons. Things had, of course, changed greatly over that time.

“Yes. I believe I told you a bit about it, thirty years back. A new country, the Empire, was created when the demons united with the humans. Well, that nation has become much more powerful. It’s one of the largest countries on the Eastern Continent,” Pork Loin Cutlet explained to his old friend, who only knew demons as beasts to kill or be killed by during the war. “So, demons now live together with humans in towns and villages, even in the Kingdom and the Duchy.”

The elves might see thirty years as a blip in their lives, but for humans, it’s quite a long time. I’ve gotten old.

Pork Loin Cutlet grinned. While Yomi waited for her food, he wanted to tell her about all sorts of things.

Pork Loin Cutlet, also known as the great sage Altorius, was one of the heroes of the great demon war. He had reunited with his old friend Yomi thirty years ago, when the Restaurant to Another World first opened.

Far, far into the past, long before the elf population had declined severely due to an unknown disease they’d brought back from the other world, they’d once tried to invade that world.

They’d brought with them a magic tool that connected the worlds. Since the other world’s society lacked magic, however, the tool simply did the rounds as an antique.

As fate—or perhaps the gods—would have it, that antique eventually fell into Yomi’s hands. At the time, she’d already spent forty years of her life in the other world and even had a grandson.

The tool was a way to connect the world she lived in to the world she’d come from. It could grant her immediate passage back and forth. Yomi had discussed the matter with her husband, Nekoya’s previous master, the only man who knew her true origins.

“In that case, how about we welcome the folks from your side as customers? I completely understand what it feels like to want to know what’s happening at home,” the previous master had said.

This seemingly out-of-the-blue suggestion was the spark that eventually became the flame. It was the first step toward creating the Restaurant to Another World.

Using her first-class magical skills and the tool, Yomi summoned to Nekoya the most talented magic user she knew—Alto, also known as Altorius.

At the time, I was stunned.

A door had suddenly appeared in his room. When he’d cautiously crossed through, he’d found Yomi waiting for him on the other side. He’d then indulged in a tremendously delicious otherworldly meal.

Altorius had experienced many mysterious things during the war. But even for him, the restaurant was a constant string of surprises. He’d thought that his old friend had passed on long ago.

Not that the following thirty years weren’t dripping with surprises, too.

Altorius knew that this restaurant’s very existence, and its many recipes, had caused all kinds of changes in his world over the past three decades—changes large and small alike, although Altorius wasn’t capable of perceiving every single one.

He knew for a fact, however, that the Empire would never have gotten its hands on cobbler’s tubers were it not for Nekoya. Without it, the nation wouldn’t have gained the power it now had.

That was a testament to the Restaurant to Another World's influence.

Jeez. Way too much has changed since our world got involved with this place.

Keeping those thoughts buried in his heart, Pork Loin Cutlet asked his old friend a question.

"So, where have you been the last ten years? How've you spent your time since the previous master passed on? After you disappeared, I thought for sure that you'd left this life as well."

"Well, I moved into my grandson's house."

The pair exchanged stories as if filling in blank parchment, continuing until Koyomi's meal arrived.

As they spoke, the waitress gently placed a plate on the table before Koyomi.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your pork loin cutlet."

"Oh, thank you so much."

Perhaps thanks to her old friend, Koyomi had grown more comfortable with the situation. Now, she was able to thank the demon girl naturally.

The aromatic, freshly browned pork loin cutlet rested on netting, so as to avoid the moisture of the mountain of cut cabbage. A lemon leaned against this mountain, and a large bowl brimmed with steaming rice.

The scent of the miso soup and pickled vegetables made Koyomi narrow her eyes gleefully.

Mmm. This is how a pork loin cutlet has to be.

She picked up her chopsticks and brought her hands together. At times like this, she knew she should give her full attention to the food before her.

"Thank you for the food."

She offered a brief grace and then grabbed a slice directly from the middle of the cutlet. Koyomi's personal policy was to eat the first piece without putting anything on it.

The freshly cooked pork loin cutlet smelled amazing. A thin strip of bright pink meat, complete with translucent white fat edges, barely peeked out from the

golden-brown surface. Koyomi brought the slice to her mouth and chewed.

Oh, my. This is certainly delicious.

The thinly sliced meat underneath the fried surface was incredibly tender and mixed together with its juices.

To properly enjoy the aromatic breading and fresh meat, Koyomi opted not to put toppings on them. That was her way of doing things, which she'd established over the past seventy years.

All right. Next is...

After crunching through the first piece of meat, Koyomi used her favorite toppings. Picking up the lemon off to the side of the plate, she squeezed it over the cutlet. Then she reached for the sauce on the table, pouring it over both the cutlet and cabbage. With her chopsticks, Koyomi picked up a brown and black slice of cutlet, putting some mustard on top before taking a bite.

Mmm. It's all about the sauce!

The sour, salty sauce and acidic lemon juice she'd added didn't affect the meat's savory flavor or the taste of the breading. Meanwhile, the mustard's heat went right to Koyomi's nostrils.

She nodded to herself as she piled rice into her mouth. It wrapped the strong flavors of the sauce, mustard, and lemon juice in a warm, sweet embrace.

There's no better way to enjoy pork loin cutlet than with a bowl of this rice!

Koyomi had been born in the Mountain Nation, where rice was the primary food. After battling the dark lord, she'd spent seven decades in Japan, which couldn't have been more perfect.

It was a fact—and Koyomi's own personal motto—that you couldn't have pork loin cutlet without rice.

It didn't take long for the meat and cabbage on her plate to disappear. Soon, the rice and miso soup vanished as well.

"Phew..."

The last piece of cutlet was tender from absorbing all the sauce. Bringing it to

her mouth, Koyomi let out an extremely satisfied sigh.

She felt that her grandson's pork loin cutlet was even more delicious than Daiki's. Her grandson had made his own alterations to the recipe in terms of frying, breading, and the thickness of the meat. However, she also felt that he still wasn't quite a match for her husband.

Sadly, Koyomi hadn't tasted her husband's cooking in ten years. The flavor remained but a memory deep within her.

"You've really learned to enjoy food since coming here."

Pork Loin Cutlet drank his beer, watching his friend clear her dish completely. He was both exasperated and filled with nostalgia.

Long ago, back when he and Koyomi had traveled together, the hero known as the Demon King Slayer had expressed no joy, no sadness, nothing. She had existed simply to hunt and slaughter demons.

She even seemed to think of food merely as a necessity for staying alive.

Thanks to the last seventy years, however—and perhaps because Koyomi had been blessed with fortunate circumstances—she'd become truly human. Pork Loin Cutlet was happy about this change but saddened that he hadn't been present for any of it.

"Oh? I would think it quite obvious that one should enjoy delicious food."

Koyomi called the demon waitress over.

"I'm sorry, dear, but could you call the restaurant's master for me? I have something important to talk to him about."

The girl blinked, somewhat confused. "Excuse me?"

"Just tell him that a customer's calling him. He should understand. Okay?" Koyomi smiled, ending the conversation.

The demon girl entered the kitchen, and the master came out soon after. He walked to Koyomi's side slowly.

"I knew it was you, Grandma..." He sighed.

The master had seen this coming. The older man in front of him was the go-to

guy when it came to ordering pork loin cutlet. However, only one person requested the dish with a large side order of rice—his grandmother.

“So, what’s up? What’s this important thing you wanna talk about, Grandma?”

In his grandmother’s presence, perhaps out of nostalgia, the master automatically reverted to the tone he’d taken as a child living with his grandparents.

“Well, actually, it’s about the front door’s master key. I came to give it to you.”

When the previous master died, Koyomi had held on to the key for safekeeping. Now that her grandson was managing the restaurant just fine, she felt it was the perfect time to entrust the key to him.

“I have a duplicate, you know.”

“That’s not enough. This key has a special ability.” Koyomi shook her head at her baffled grandson. “Should you ever decide to close the Restaurant to Another World for good, break this key. When you do, the magic in the door will disappear.” She caressed the master key gently.

Truth be told, Koyomi might’ve been better off if she’d shut this place down ten years ago, when Daiki died of a heart attack.

But she hadn’t closed it then.

It was a Saturday not long after Daiki’s funeral. Her grandson, still a young man at the time, opened the restaurant as usual.

“Gramps told me, ‘If anything ever happens to me, I leave it all to you. You can keep running this joint, close it down, or even sell it off. But to be honest, I hope you keep it going.’”

Koyomi’s grandson had lived with Daiki—a bona fide chef—since he was just a young boy. He’d trained as a chef and inherited Western Cuisine Nekoya as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Her grandson went on to do all sorts of things the previous master had never

done. He even helped make the restaurant more popular than it ever was back in the day.

He had captured the hearts of new and old regulars alike. Western Cuisine Nekoya was no longer Daiki's restaurant, so it was time for Koyomi to give her grandson everything.

"Understood. I'll take good care of this."

Seemingly understanding his grandmother, the master took the key and slipped it into his breast pocket.

"Thank you for your patronage. We look forward to your next visit."

With all the reverence in the world, the master bowed deeply to the one regular who'd supported Western Cuisine Nekoya longer than any other customer in its history.

"Of course. Next time, though, I'll be swinging by on a weekday. Sorry, but do you mind if I use the back entrance?"

If Koyomi left using that door, would she come out the other side still in this world? Or would she exit into another world entirely? She had no intention of testing that.

This world is my home. It's where I belong. I want my life to end where Daiki's life ended.

These were Koyomi's true feelings, and she didn't harbor even a shred of doubt.

Special Chapter 4:

Breakfast **As the full moon slowly retreated, its light illuminated the night's deep, deep darkness.**

Koyomi had changed out of her pajamas and into her usual serving outfit. She walked alone along the dark street. Despite the blackness of the night, she didn't hesitate, moving confidently toward her destination.

At this time of night, they must be out.

The “other world” was different from Koyomi's original world in many ways but similar in others. On nights with a full moon, for example, both worlds overflowed with the darkness's magical powers, strengthening the undead.

On those nights, ghosts would appear. Ghosts that she only faintly sensed during the day.

How long has it been since I've done battle?

She chuckled to herself. She'd fought off disgraced soldiers trying desperately to shirk their debt and even pushed back yakuza failures who were after her body. Those encounters didn't register as real combat to Koyomi.

After being sent to this foreign world, meeting Daiki, and helping him in the kitchen to repay his kindness, “Yomi” had died.

The Yomi in the other world who only knew fighting—the Demon King Slayer—no longer existed. According to Daiki, her name meant “the underworld” in this world's language, so she took the name Koyomi. It was Koyomi who existed and worked as a waitress here.

Now then...

Without speaking a word, Koyomi arrived at her destination—the basement floor of a building that she and Daiki had managed to rent for far less than the asking price. On that floor, Koyomi had sensed something unnerving.

It's been a long time.

Something was there, that much was certain. Koyomi drew close to the old

door, turning the brand-new handle that they'd secretly borrowed from Daiki's place.

Ka-ching!

The door unlocked and opened. From within the room came intense heat and the scent of fresh blood.

Heh, heh. Been a while since I've felt this.

Koyomi held her breath in response to the presence. She smiled, remembering the kill-or-be-killed days of yore, before she'd found her peaceful life in this world.

She breathed shallowly, minimizing the sound of her footsteps as she drew farther into the room.

Earlier that day, she and Daiki had made sure that the rental was spotless. The well-kept tables and chairs that the previous owner had left behind were still in place. Amid them, Koyomi saw the location's previous owner, a man dressed in this nation's military uniform.

Get...out... Get out...of my restaurant...

According to Daiki, this country had lost its last great war. The soldiers who'd participated in the enormous battle hadn't been landowning knights or mercenaries seeking money. They were simple merchants and farmers. The location's previous owner had probably been a chef who'd gone to battle and died.

The man's current condition made it clear how he'd been killed. Half his face was gone—burnt away, in fact. He didn't move as he stared Koyomi down. She returned his glare in kind.

He's not all gone.

Koyomi could tell that the man in front of her was either becoming a wraith or was a ghost deeply attached to this location. In other words, he was dangerous to a normal man like Daiki, who had no means of fighting back.

"Sorry. This isn't personal. It's just... This is our place now."

Koyomi approached the man calmly and slapped him, her palm full of dark

magic.

Ooooooooooooooh!

That was it. Koyomi had neither equipment nor reliable allies, but against a creature that was barely a wraith, she didn't need either of those. It took but a single blow of magical energy to erase the spirit, who'd simply wished to return from the great war.

"Now then, time to head home."

The matter settled, Koyomi dropped her shoulders and turned her back on the empty restaurant, locking the door behind her.

Daiki often woke early for work. If she didn't get back soon, he'd wake up without her and worry.

Koyomi hurried along the dark path home, forgetting her battle against the ghost mere moments ago.

Opening her eyes, Koyomi caught the scent of miso coming from the kitchen. It was already bright, and she could hear sparrows chirping outside.

Did I fall back asleep? Was I really that tired from fighting for the first time in ages?

After returning from the previous night's excursion, Koyomi had changed into her pajamas to prevent Daiki from discovering her little adventure. She'd closed her eyes to make it seem as though she were sleeping, but apparently, she'd actually fallen asleep.

Normally, she woke up at the same time as Daiki and helped him prepare. Today, however, she was late. Of course, there wasn't any food prep to do, since they were preparing to open the new restaurant.

"Yo! G'morning."

Koyomi was still thinking under her thin bedding when Daiki peeked into the room. He wore his usual slacks and a T-shirt with an apron, a hand towel wrapped around his head.

“Food’s ready, so wash your face and let’s eat! I kinda went all out.”

His words excited Koyomi’s stomach. After watching him leave, she changed into a blouse and skirt, rather than her usual work clothes. The garments were precious gifts that Daiki had given her half a year ago.

She quickly combed her hair, tying it up so it wouldn’t get in the way, then headed for the dining area. Her heart was aflutter at the thought of a big meal. It had been a while.

Breakfast was truly something else.

“This is...kind of crazy,” Koyomi couldn’t help remarking.

A large bowl held shimmering white rice. Another held miso soup full of clams. Daiki had also cooked nukazuke, golden-yellow eggs, and fried mackerel.

Their breakfast normally consisted of natto, miso soup, and nukazuke. This might as well have been a celebratory feast.

“Well, y’know, we’re opening the restaurant soon. Things are gonna get busy and all.”

Daiki looked away, red-faced, as he explained his reasoning.

“C’mon, eat up, before it gets cold. We gotta head to city hall to fill out the paperwork today.”

He closed his eyes, clapping his hands together.

“Thanks for the food.”

This world’s people said a sort of pre-meal prayer. After speaking those words, Daiki reached for his chopsticks.

“Thanks for the food.”

Koyomi followed his example.

Let’s start with the fish... I believe he called it “mackerel.”

The bluish-silver mackerel had been boiled in miso until it turned nicely brown. Koyomi didn’t mind its sweet and sour flavor, but she also loved it salted.

“Here’s the soy sauce.”

After Koyomi picked up her chopsticks, Daiki passed her the soy sauce. They’d lived together for a few years, so some things simply went without saying.

Koyomi poured soy sauce over the radish beside the fried fish. Slicing the mackerel with her chopsticks, she placed radish on top and then took a bite.

As her chopsticks lifted the meat from beneath the crunchy fried skin, its juices flowed out. The mackerel’s flavor mingled with the partially cooked, snowy white radish’s sourness and the salty soy sauce, making Koyomi’s cheeks puff out instantly.

The fish would’ve been overwhelming on its own, but Koyomi ate it with the white radish. Whoever had thought up that way of serving mackerel was a genius, she decided.

The feast didn’t stop there, however.

Koyomi turned her attention to the freshly cooked rice. The pure, untouched white rice was just as important a food in this world as in hers. It was neither too soft nor too hard—just perfect for Koyomi. It tasted sweeter and sweeter with each bite.

The former warrior gulped down the rice as if it were liquid. The white rice and mackerel combination was so perfect that her chopsticks didn’t stop moving.

Koyomi’s mouth occasionally felt a bit greasy. At that point, she would pile in some nukazuke. The white radish’s salty flavor washed the grease away.

Radish will actually be out of season pretty soon.

It was already spring, so the season for radish was just about over. The nukazuke would contain seasonal vegetables instead of radish before long.

Koyomi stared down at the empty rice bowl.

“We’ve got more than enough for seconds. That’s why you left the fried egg for last, right?”

Daiki knew Koyomi all too well. He grinned, picked up her empty bowl, and refilled it.

“Thanks.”

Koyomi placed the bowl on the low table, reaching for the miso soup.

The salty broth had a unique flavor. And there was no sand to be found in the large clams that completed it, either. Daiki had picked them well.

Sipping the still-hot soup, Koyomi tasted the bonito base, blended with the savory taste of the clams. The mollusks had absorbed the miso broth. It flowed out whenever Koyomi opened a clamshell with her mouth.

The breakfast was, in a word, delicious. It was clear to Koyomi why, back when Daiki had just been running a food stall, customers had been more than satisfied with bowls of rice and miso soup.

After eating her fill of the miso soup, Koyomi finally set her sights on the fried egg. Her favorite way to eat the dish involved tasting it on its own first. She brought a piece of the carefully sliced golden-yellow egg to her mouth.

Mmph... Puts a smile on my face every time.

The fried egg was faintly sweet. In fact, Daiki made it that way especially for her. Although he often served much saltier fried eggs, he added a bit more sugar when cooking for Koyomi. That was her favorite way to eat them.

She was overjoyed. All Daiki’s dishes were delicious, but the fact that he’d adjusted his recipe just for her made it all the more delightful.

Pleased as punch, Koyomi topped the warm fried egg with soy sauce-drenched white radish and took a bite. The radish’s bitter flavor mixed with the strong saltiness of the soy sauce, creating a sublime new taste.

The meal continued. Koyomi added nukazuke to the remaining miso soup, which helped her demolish the rest of the rice.

Once the meal was done, she put her hands together and offered a prayer.

“Thank you for the food.”

Her words overlapped with Daiki’s, and the pair chuckled.

After sipping their teas for a while, the couple found that they still had time to

spare. There was no work at the restaurant for the day. All they had to do was visit city hall to fill out paperwork before the day was done. It would be simple.

Stomachs as full as they could be, the couple enjoyed each other's company in silence. Then Daiki spoke up, a serious expression on his face.

"So, uh... There's something important I want to talk to you about."

His tanned face was bright red.

"Um, would you come with me to city hall today?"

"I mean, that was the plan," Koyomi responded, puzzled.

Ever since she'd come to this world, she and Daiki had done everything together. She was, of course, planning on going to city hall later. What was he getting at?

Daiki took out a brown paper envelope.

"I was thinking of submitting this marriage registration..."

The paper Daiki removed from the envelope was neatly folded, not a crease in sight. The pretty document clearly hadn't been written by human hands. The characters on it had been penned with otherworldly technology, and there was no doubt as to what they said.

Underneath the text, Daiki's name—Yamagata *Daiki*—was written in his own handwriting beside a blank line.

"I was just, um, thinking that this is the perfect time. I finally have my own restaurant and all... So, I feel like I'm ready."

Daiki's face was bright red, and Koyomi could tell he was tremendously nervous. Her own face flushed, too.

"So, um... Will you marry me?"

Daiki went quiet and stared deep into Koyomi's eyes.

She gazed back, responding with a single word as her cheeks turned bright pink.

"Yes."





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